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# Construction of spiritual identity: CMM and conversion to Catholicism

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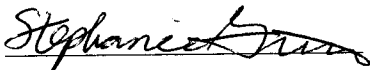
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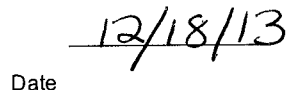
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The Construction of Spiritual Identity:

CMM and Conversion to Catholicism

(TITLE)

BY

Stephanie Gruner

**THESIS**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
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IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
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The Construction of Spiritual Identity:

CMM and Conversion to Catholicism

Stephanie Gruner

Eastern Illinois University

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**Abstract**

This study uses the Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) to examine the spiritual stories of six people who were not raised Catholic, but joined the Catholic faith as adults. The participants' experiences reveal that their spiritual identities have both personal and communal aspects and that they view their identities as both fixed and changing. Additionally, when communicating their spiritualities to others these individuals must balance relationship concerns with the desire to express their spiritual identities. Applying CMM's hierarchy of meaning to the data shows that the levels work together in shaping the participants' understandings of their identities. The participants' relationships and interactions (speech acts, episodes) with others led them to the realization that the Catholic faith (construction system) "fit" their personal identity (life-script) and/or to the realization that they wanted to incorporate the Catholic faith (construction system) into their personal identity (life-script). The research supports the notion that the internal and external aspects of identity are highly interdependent.

*Keywords:* communication, spiritual identity, spiritual conversion, coordinated management of meaning, relationships, Catholicism

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

According to the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, as of 2009, 44% of adults in the U.S. are not currently affiliated with their childhood religion, including those who were raised with no religious affiliation. On April 7, 2012, the day I was officially confirmed as a member of the Catholic Church, I joined this group of American adults.

I grew up attending various Christian churches, including Lutheran, Methodist, and non-denominational parishes, but became involved with the Newman Catholic Center on my college campus when I started college in the fall of 2008. Although I met many friends there and enjoyed going to mass and various events the church sponsored, I had no intention of actually becoming Catholic. Yet three years later, I began the process of taking RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults) classes to learn more about Catholicism. And a year after beginning this endeavor (about six months after officially becoming Catholic) I wrote an autoethnography about my experiences transitioning into this new faith.

Reflecting on my own spiritual journey has led to my interest in studying spiritual identity. This thesis explores the experiences of people who also did not grow up Catholic, but made the transition into the Catholic faith in adulthood. Specifically, it examines how they view their spiritual identities, how their relationships affect their spiritual identities, and how they express their spiritual identities to others. One of my reasons for studying this group in particular is that it reflects my own experience. When I began this project, I hoped that this would allow me to better connect to, understand, and develop rapport with my participants. Since I've taken the steps necessary to become Catholic myself, I've been able to share my own story with the participants and find

connections between my experiences and theirs. I used reflexive dyadic interviews in this study, which is an approach that involves researcher disclosures in addition to participant sharing (Ellis & Berger, 2003). Interviewer self-disclosures can promote a sense of equality and foster feelings of trust between the researcher and participants, helping the participants feel more comfortable when sharing their own stories. Furthermore, relating to my participants through reflexive dyadic interviews helped me to maintain the reflexive attitude required of qualitative researchers (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

**Rationale**

The transition to Catholicism from another faith is a rather rare occurrence, and therefore quite intriguing:

While the ranks of the unaffiliated have grown the most due to changes in religious affiliation, the Catholic Church has lost the most members in the same process; this is the case even though Catholicism's retention rate of childhood members (68%) is far greater than the retention rate of the unaffiliated and is comparable with or better than the retention rates of other religious groups. Those who have left Catholicism outnumber those who have joined the Catholic Church by nearly a four-to-one margin. Overall, one-in-ten American adults (10.1%) have left the Catholic Church after having been raised Catholic, while only 2.6% of adults have become Catholic after having been raised something other than Catholic. (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2009, "Leaving Catholicism" sec., para. 1)

What is it that attracts the 2.6% to Catholicism? Perhaps the stories of the participants in this study can shed some light on this question. Why did they decide to become Catholic? Do they foresee future changes in their spiritual identities? What were their experiences with RCIA like? These are just some of the questions that the participants in this study were asked. Thus, another reason I've chosen to concentrate on Catholic converts is that doing so may provide practical benefits for Catholic churches in recruiting and retaining new members.

As for the study of spiritual identity, it is important because for many people this aspect of their identity affects all other aspects of their self-conception (Pecchenino, 2009). Roehlkepartain, Benson, and Scales (2011) hypothesize:

Spiritual development is a human wellspring out of which emerges the pursuit of meaning, connectedness to others and to the sacred, purpose in life, and contributions to society. Each and all of these functions can be informed and shaped by religious - and other - systems of ideas, practices, and cultural narratives. In addition, these core processes are integrally linked with identity development. (p. 546)

For those for whom this is true, we may expect their sense of spiritual identity to significantly influence their beliefs, actions, behaviors, values, and life in general. Especially important from a communication perspective is the influence that one's sense of spirituality and one's interpersonal relationships have on one another. For example, in a study of interfaith couples, a group that represents 37 percent of spousal relationships in the U.S. (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2008), Hughes and Dickson (2005) found that intrinsic religious orientation (religion as an end in itself) was associated with

marital satisfaction and constructive communication while extrinsic religious orientation (religion as a means to an end) was inversely associated with these categories but directly associated with demand-withdrawal communication.

Gottman's work also emphasizes the impact that the values and beliefs marital partners bring to a marriage can have on marital satisfaction. He explains the importance of "meshing" (Gottman & Silver, 1999, p. 244) these views in order to create "an inner life together" (p. 243):

The more you can agree about the fundamentals in life, the richer, more meaningful, and in a sense easier your marriage is likely to be. You certainly can't force yourselves to have the same deeply held views. But some coming together on these issues is likely to occur naturally if you are open to each other's perspectives. *A crucial goal of any marriage, therefore, is to create an atmosphere that encourages each person to talk honestly about his or her convictions.* The more you speak candidly and respectfully with each other, the more likely there is to be a blending of your sense of meaning. (Gottman & Silver, 1999, p. 245)

Though for Gottman, finding "a deeper sense of shared meaning" (Gottman & Silver, 1999, p. 243) in marriage does not have to be related to spiritual beliefs, it is similar to Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, and Murray-Swank's (2003) term "sanctification." They found that the degree to which people perceive their relationships as having spiritual significance, which they refer to as "sanctification," is "associated with more adaptive functioning in marital and parent-child relationships" (p. 232). Some of these adaptive functions for marital relationships include higher investment in the

marriage, less frequent conflict, and more frequent use of collaboration when disagreement occurs. They also posit that “avoiding the loss of sanctified family relationships may motivate family members to invest more time, energy, and resources into these bonds” (p. 228). Through sanctification, “people are able to experience God or nurture their sense of spirituality through participation in family relationships” (Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, & Murray-Swank, 2003, p. 222).

On the other hand, Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, and Murray-Swank (2003) also describe negative relational outcomes associated with religion and/or spirituality. These include the possibility that family members’ different interpretations of religious beliefs may result in conflict, the spiritual devastation and guilt that may accompany divorce for those who perceived their marriage as being connected to the sacred, and institutional restrictions for what may or may not constitute a sacred relationship. Thus, family members’ religion and/or spirituality may influence what they consider to be a “good” mother, father, husband, wife, son, or daughter, and how they fill these roles (Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, & Murray-Swank, 2003).

Though research suggests that religion and spirituality may have profound effects on the lives of relational partners, “few communication scholars address this area” (Galvin, 2013, p. 534). I have tried to address this area by asking the participants in this study questions that specifically examine the connection between their spiritual identities and relationships, asking them to reflect on their everyday interactions and conversations with others concerning the subject of spirituality, and applying a communication theory to their responses. In applying a communication theory, the Coordinated Management of Meaning, to the participants’ experiences, I’ve created an opportunity to study how

messages about spiritual identity, faith, and religion are created and interpreted by interactants within particular contexts and between certain relational partners.

Furthermore, this research offers the opportunity to see how social interaction may shape individuals' ideas about spiritual identity, faith, and religion. As I will discuss later, the data does support the notion that spiritual identity affects relationships and vice versa.

Because spirituality, religion, and interpersonal relationships can strongly influence one another, studying these factors in regard to spiritual change is important. “[S]piritual conversion radically alters a person’s understanding of the sacred, the self, relationships, and one’s place in the universe” (Mahoney & Pargament, 2004, p. 483). An individual’s spiritual transformation may result in important changes in the way he or she interacts with others, especially significant others. But not only do spiritual conversions affect relationships, interpersonal relationships can also influence spiritual conversions. For example, Mahoney and Pargament (2004) note the impact of “attending religious services, engaging in intimate dialogues as well as formal discussions with fellow believers, undergoing religious education, and seeking out spiritual guidance when distressed” as well as the necessity of a “fundamental shift in one’s relationship to the sacred” (p. 490) in leading to spiritual conversion. These authors emphasize the private *and* social aspects of spiritual conversion, pointing out the importance that many religious traditions themselves place on “communion with others” (p. 490).

Indeed, another reason for studying converts to the Catholic faith in particular lies in the importance the Catholic Church places on “community.” As will be discussed, much of the literature on spiritual identity is from a psychological perspective that is heavily focused on individual experiences. In taking a communication perspective and in



considering the teachings of the Catholic Church, I believe studying Catholic converts can provide insight into the ways in which spiritual identity can also be a social experience.

Burr (2003) argues:

But not only do our subject positions constrain and shape what we do, they are taken on as part of our psychology such that they provide us also with our sense of self, the ideas and metaphors with which we think, and the self-narratives we use to talk and think about ourselves. As such, we have an emotional commitment to and investment in our subject positions which goes beyond mere rule following. (p. 124)

Studying changes to a person's spiritual subject position may give us insight into the significance that this aspect of identity has on a person's overall sense of self and on his/her relationships. Because I am studying this topic from an interpersonal communication perspective specifically, I will focus not only on my participants' individual identities, but also on the relational aspects of their lives that help them form their perceptions of these identities.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Social Constructionism

I've taken a social constructionist approach to this study as I believe that "realities are socially constructed by and between human beings in their expressive and interpretive practices. Meaningful realities are emergent, collaborative, and symbolic in nature" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 11). Rather than assuming there is a "true" spiritual identity within each of the participants that I need to "find," I explore how these participants construct their identities through intrapersonal and interpersonal communication. The point is to consider how the participants *view* their spiritual identities, how they *present* these identities to others, and how others' responses influence their *perceptions* of their identities, as opposed to trying to determine the "true nature" of their identities.

Additionally, social constructionism aligns with theories and concepts I will use in discussing spiritual identity, such as identity in general, narrative, and the Coordinated Management of Meaning. I will discuss each of these below, as well as the current research on spiritual identity, demonstrating how "communication produces rather than reflects reality" (Griffin, 1997, p. 293). However, it is important to note that in taking a social constructionist approach, I do not mean to "dismiss" any of my participants' "beliefs as mere social constructions" (Ellis & Berger, 2003, p. 474). What I do mean to do is examine how the participants construct their understandings of their spiritual identities within the context of relationships and community.

### Identity

Before we can explore how spiritual identity is constructed, we must first examine the literature on identity in general. Many scholars consider identity to be "a dialectical

synthesis of internal and external definitions” (Jenkins, 2004, p. 19). For example, Mead (1934) believed a person’s identity to be made up of both the “I” and the “me.” The “I” is a person’s unique, spontaneous individuality while the “me” allows a person to see him/herself as others may see him/her. So, the “I” is the self as subject, and the “me” is the self as object. Mead saw the self as a process of combining these two parts of the self, rather than as a structure that simply contains them (Blumer, 1969):

The self is something which has a development; it is not initially there, at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops in the given individual as a result of his [*sic.*] relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process. (Mead, 1934, p. 135)

Consistent with social constructionism, “fundamental to symbolic interactionism is the view that as people we construct our own and each other’s identities through our everyday encounters with each other in social interaction” (Burr, 1995, p. 9-10). Our relationships with others and our ability to “take the role of the other” allow us to see ourselves from others’ perspectives, and we internalize the attitudes and reactions of others toward us in the form of the “me” (Mead, 1934). Mead drew from the work of Charles Cooley and his “looking-glass self.” Cooley (1902) explained the looking-glass self as “the imagination of our appearance to the other person, the imagination of his [*sic.*] judgment of that appearance, and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification” (p. 152). We imagine what others think of us and this influences how we think of ourselves. Similarly, Mead (1934) refers to “the attitude of the whole community” as “the generalized other” (p. 154). The generalized other, or the representation of the ways in which a community or group think about one another,

society, and social activities, affects a person's sense of self and his/her behavior. In this way, it "exercises control" as a "determining factor into the individual's thinking" and in setting social expectations for individuals within a society (p. 155). On the other hand, "we are not simply bound by the community" because we can change the way the community thinks about us, or about other things, through interaction with others (p. 168). We also may behave in spontaneous and unique ways through the "I" self, which constitutes an individual's responses to the attitudes of the community. These are some of the reasons Mead (1934) argues that "when a self does appear it always involves an experience of another; there could not be an experience of a self simply by itself" (p. 195). Likewise, Cooley (1902) states that "there is no sense of 'I' . . . without its correlative sense of you, or he, or they" (p. 151).

This is not to deny the influence of the "I" however, as the experience of the "me" also depends on the experience of the "I." In order for something to be a "self" it must be able to reflect, act upon, and respond to itself (Blumer, 1969). "The importance of what we term 'communication' lies in the fact that it provides a form of behavior in which the organism or the individual may become an object to himself [*sic.*]" (Mead, 1934, p. 138). So in addition to interacting with others, we must also be able to be "self-conscious" (Mead, 1934, p. 225), or capable of seeing ourselves as objects, in order to be considered selves. We do this by attempting to understand the "I," our unique self that gives us a sense of freedom and initiative, by examining it. However, we can only experience the "I" self in that moment of freedom and initiative because as soon as we examine our "I" self, it becomes an object that we try to conceptualize; it is impossible to ever study the "I" because as soon as we do, we are really looking at the "me." Furthermore, the "I" is

connected to the generalized other or looking-glass self by “the very fact that the word and the ideas it stands for are phenomena of language and the communicative life” (Cooley, 1902, p. 149). Thus, another way we construct our identities is in communication with ourselves in reflection and remembrance of our “I,” or subjective self, through the “me,” or objective self. “The ‘I’ of this moment is present in the ‘me’ of the next moment” (Mead, 1934, p. 174). If there were no “I,” the “me” would be unintelligible. “What appears in consciousness is always the self as an object, as a ‘me,’ but the ‘me’ is not conceivable without an ‘I’ as a unique subject for which the ‘me’ can be an object” (Coser, 1977, p. 338).

To sum up, both the individual’s awareness of his/herself and his/her relation to others are necessary in order for a person’s identity to be constructed. “Both aspects of the ‘I’ and ‘me’ are essential to the self in its full expression” (Mead, 1934, p. 199).

Similar to Mead’s “I” and “me” are the “True Self” and “False Self” of Winnicott (1965). Winnicott presents the True Self as the spontaneous, creative, and original core self that feels “real.” The False Self he sees as hiding and protecting the True Self; it “performs” based on the person’s relation to others and his/her perceptions of their expectations. Mead (1934) also argues that the “me” serves as a “censor” and describes “social control” as the “expression of the ‘me’ over against the expression of the ‘I’” (p. 210). However, as Alma and Zock (2002) point out, the “True” and “False” labels Winnicott uses imply that one aspect is “good” and the other is “bad,” while Mead’s “I” and “me” terms don’t seem to assign value to either.

Goffman (1959) also notes the influence of others’ expectations on the self as he argues that to be considered a certain type of person, it is not enough to possess relevant

qualities. One must also “sustain the standards of conduct and appearance that one’s social grouping attaches” to that type of person (p. 75). Goffman (1959) therefore considers an individual’s presentation of his or her self to others to be a performance, with the “frontstage” being open to observation by others and the “backstage” being “a place where the performer can reliably expect that no member of the audience will intrude” (p. 113). A person’s “personal front” consists of “equipment” used during his/her performance, such as demographic characteristics, social roles, and bodily expressions, to convey a certain impression (p. 22). The impression a person wishes to convey depends on who is observing him/her. In line with other identity theorists, Goffman’s (1959) conception of the self sees identity as influenced both by the individual and others with whom the individual interacts. A performer’s frontstage and backstage impact one another. For example, a performer may sincerely believe in his/her own performance so that it becomes a part of his/her self even when “backstage.” Conversely, performers may become “cynical” of their acts if their front and back stages do not match up, and might even “use this cynicism as a means of insulating their inner selves from contact with the audience” (p. 20).

Finally, the personal and social aspects of identity are also examined by Erikson (1959) who explains that personal identity “is based on two simultaneous observations: the immediate perception of one’s selfsameness and continuity in time; and the simultaneous perception of the fact that others recognize one’s sameness and continuity” (p. 23). A person’s ego identity “concerns more than the mere *fact* of existence” and in its “subjective aspect,” it is:

The awareness of the fact that there is a selfsameness and continuity to the ego's synthesizing methods, the *style of one's individuality*, and that this style coincides with the sameness and continuity of one's *meaning for significant others* in the immediate community. (Erikson, 1968, p. 50)

Clearly, the works discussed above have shaped an understanding of identity as dependent upon both internal and external sources. An individual's conception of his/her self is shaped by communication with others as well as with him/herself. How we see ourselves depends on how we interact with others and how we think others see us; in turn, how we see ourselves and how we think others see us shapes our interactions with them. Individual and social influences on identity are highly interdependent.

The idea of interdependence is important, and Hecht (1993) urges that we don't simply view the individual and social realms as "polar opposites":

We often think of contradictions between only two elements at a time . . .

However, three or more elements may be in opposition . . . This is particularly germane to identity, which has often been cast in terms of the dialectic between the individual and society. (p. 76)

The communication theory of identity developed by Hecht and his colleagues holds eight basic assumptions:

- (1) Identities have individual, enacted, relational, and communal properties;
- (2) Identities are both enduring and changing;
- (3) Identities are affective, cognitive, behavioral, and spiritual;
- (4) Identities have both content and relationship levels of interpretation;
- (5) Identities involve both subjective and ascribed meanings;

- (6) Identities are codes that are expressed in conversations and define membership in communities;
  - (7) Identities have semantic properties that are expressed in core symbols, meanings, and labels;
  - (8) Identities prescribe modes of appropriate and effective communication.
- (Hecht, Collier, & Ribeau, 1993)

The frames of identity mentioned in their first basic assumption can be described as personal (individual cognitions of self), enacted (communicative messages about the self brought forth through interaction), relational (mutual construction of the individuals' identity and the relationship's identity), and communal (a group's collective memory of identity, which it teaches to new members and which bonds the group together) (Hecht, Collier, & Ribeau, 1993). As the current study will show, and as the researchers behind the communication theory of identity stress, these frames do not exist in isolation:

Thus identity may be understood as a characteristic of the person, the enactment, the relationship, and the community. In addition, we may take these frames two, three, or four at a time and understand their layering, juxtaposition, interpenetration, and dialectic tension. (Hecht, 1993, p. 79)

In this study, I consider how these personal and social frames work together to influence the ways in which the participants view and express their spiritual identities.

### **Spiritual Identity**

Many scholars have situated the study of spiritual identity within the work of these and other identity theorists. For example, Alma and Zock (2002) posit that we should "be concerned with the tension between uniqueness and sociocultural influences



as both fundamental aspects of a person's identity" (p. 1). They apply Mead's and Winnicott's work to spiritual identity in particular:

The 'I' of Mead and the 'True Self' of Winnicott relate to experiences that usually are associated with *spirituality*: feeling real and at one with oneself, being active and creative, ready for personal commitments. The term 'commitment' should be stressed in this regard, for spirituality in a Meadian and Winnicottian sense always has to do with relating oneself to the (social) world. (p. 10)

Likewise, Poll and Smith (2003) refer to the self as "an integration of the experiencing object and the constructing subject; the spiritual self develops through the interplay of spiritual experience and spiritual self-constructions" (p. 133). And according to Kiesling, Sorell, Montgomery, and Colwell (2006):

Our definition of a sense of spiritual identity focuses on individual construction of a relationship to the sacred and ultimate meaning. However, in keeping with Mead (1934), whom we see as consistent with Erikson (1963, 1975, 1996), our definition posits that a sense of spiritual identity emerges as the symbolic religious and spiritual content of a culture is appropriated by individuals in the context of their own life. (p. 1270)

Again, identity is seen as both *constructed* by the individual and as influenced by relationships (with a "sacred and ultimate meaning" and with the individual's larger culture), rather than something that simply resides inside an individual. However, because spirituality is often viewed as a highly personal, individual phenomenon, it has been substantially studied in the discipline of psychology. According to MacDonald (2009), within psychological conceptualizations of the self, "spiritual identity most often

is defined as how the individual ego relates to and incorporates spirituality into its personal sense of self” (p. 90). And Roehlkepartain, Benson, and Scales (2011) argue that when it comes to spiritual development, there is a “preponderance of research that focuses on individual development with little regard to interaction with developmental systems or ecologies” (p. 546). Indeed, the following are examples of studies that explore spiritual identity through a very individualized lens.

Watson and Morris (2005) administered Berzonsky’s Identity Style Inventory (1992) to their participants and compared their scores on this with their levels of extrinsic/intrinsic orientation and their levels of quest orientation, as measured by Allport and Ross’s (1967) Religious Orientation Scale and the Quest Scale (Batson & Schoenrade, 1991), respectively. Allport (1966) defined extrinsic “churchgoers” as those “whose communal type of membership supports and serves other, nonreligious ends” and intrinsic “churchgoers” as “those for whom religion is an end in itself- a final, not instrumental, good” (p. 454). Batson proposed “religion as quest” as an additional dimension that “involves honestly facing existential questions in their complexity, while at the same time resisting clear-cut, pat answers” (Batson & Schoenrade, 1991, p. 417). The Identity Style Inventory measures three different “processing orientations” used by people to maintain a sense of identity. These include the informational orientation (individuals who “actively seek out, elaborate, and utilize self-relevant information when making identity-relevant decisions”), the normative orientation (individuals whose “major concern is conforming to the prescriptions and expectations of significant others . . . and reference groups”), and the diffuse/avoidant orientation (individuals who “characteristically avoid dealing directly with personal problems and basic identity

questions”) (Berzonsky, 1992, p. 772). Watson and Morris (2005) found that extrinsic motivation for being religious was associated with the diffuse/avoidant orientation and with lower levels of identity commitment, intrinsic motivation for being religious was associated with both the informational and normative orientations, and quest was associated with the informational orientation.

In their study of college students and spirituality, Gebelt, Thompson, and Miele (2009) also used the Identity Style Inventory and Quest Scale along with the Santa Clara Strength of Faith Questionnaire (Plante & Boccaccini, 1997), which measures the salience of faith in an individual’s life. This study found that higher informational identity scores were associated with participants who had stronger faith, questioned their beliefs more and placed more value on their doubts, and expected future changes in their beliefs. Normative identity scores also were associated with stronger faith but were not related to questioning beliefs or expecting changes in those beliefs in the future. Finally, diffuse/avoidant identity scores were not correlated with any of the spirituality measures (Gebelt, Thompson, Miele, 2009).

While these studies and measurement scales are useful for our understanding of spiritual identity, it is apparent that each leaned toward a more individualized understanding of the participants’ identities. This central focus on individual psychology is inadequate for the study of identity from a communication/social constructionist perspective that recognizes the social influences on identity formation. As Baxter (1998) argues, when we don’t simply rely on the assumption that communication “originates within the sovereign individual,” and consider “how the *person originates in*

*communication*, a different intelligibility is brought into the scholarly conversation” (p. 62).

Another problem, and perhaps the reason for this focus on the individual, with the way in which some scholars approach spiritual identity lies in their distinct differentiation between religion and spirituality; many, such as Templeton and Eccles (2006), view religiousness as a collective identity and spirituality as an individual one. In this mindset, “*religion* generally becomes associated with the institutional and the sociological (prescribed systems, rituals, and traditions or beliefs), and *spirituality* becomes associated more with personal, psychological, and individual phenomena” (Kiesling & Sorell, 2009, p. 254). Instead, MacDonald (2009) argues that “intrinsic religiosity . . . that involves personal investment and involvement in religion in order to facilitate genuine spiritual development through the lived realization of the transcendent or the sacred, should be treated as a component of spirituality” (p. 90).

Other scholars, such as Kiesling and Sorell (2009), go so far as to “seek to integrate rather than polarize” the concepts of spirituality and religiousness (p. 254). Likewise, Pargament (1999) warns that in a culture that so strongly values individual experience such as the U.S., by dichotomizing religion and spirituality, we make religion out to be a “bad,” distrustful institution and spirituality out to be a “good,” private aspect of the individual. This ignores the goal (although some may stray from this goal) of most religious organizations to foster the spiritual growth of individuals within their institution. He also points out that:

It is ironic that spiritual identity, according to many views, reflects an appreciation for the interrelatedness of all things. Yet in some ways, this

interrelatedness has been treated as a purely psychological process: It is a *sense* of connectedness that becomes the goal, rather than a connectedness that is lived out. Paradoxically, our approach to spirituality runs the risk of disconnecting people from their worlds. By polarizing religion and spirituality into the institutional and the individual, we lose sight of the individual mission of the institution and the social context of the individual; we lose the opportunity to learn how people express their faiths within the context of their lives. (p. 9)

While the previous research on spiritual identity that focuses on the individual and differentiates between religiousness and spirituality has, of course, been helpful thus far in developing our understanding of this aspect of identity, I believe that it is important to also study this area from a social constructionist communication perspective in which we consider how an individual *and his/her significant others and social context* construct the individual's spiritual identity together. Therefore, the focus of this research aligns with scholars who believe that "religiousness and spiritual experience both interact to provide meaning and psychological context to an emergent sense of spiritual identity" (MacDonald, 2009, p. 98) and consider "the reality that for millions of people formal religious participation, the content of collective ideals, and religious practices are deeply intertwined with the experiential and formative components of their self-definition" (Kiesling & Sorell, 2009, p. 254). By the phrase "spiritual identity," I mean to follow Kiesling and Sorell's (2009) description of the term as one that is "inclusive of religious belief and practice but may also involve processes and pathways to the sacred not found in traditional religion" (p. 255). I do not wish to create dichotomies between the "I" and the "me," the "True" and "False" Self, the "personal" and "social," or the "spiritual" and

“religious.” Rather, I want to study how these interdependent aspects of the self are socially constructed to form a person’s spiritual identity.

In addition to the individual-focused studies mentioned above, it is important to examine those that look at spiritual identity through a combination of individual and social lenses. MacDonald (2009) recognizes the social and personal aspects of spiritual identity in his proposal of a model of spiritual identity formation. In the formation of spiritual identity, he suggests that spiritual experience, religiousness, community and family, lifestyle, and ego permeability all contribute to one’s sense of spirituality. He describes “spiritual experiences” as a phenomenological dimension of spirituality. “Religiousness” is considered “the socially-mediated vehicle through which individuals learn the language and practices that not only facilitate an understanding of things spiritual, but also contribute to the further unfolding of spirituality experientially” (p. 98); for example, religion can teach an individual about behavioral practices that can be carried out individually, like prayer or meditation. Though he does separate these two terms in his explanation, MacDonald believes spiritual experiences and religiousness interact “to facilitate spirituality as a whole” (p. 96). “Family” is included due to its general influence on identity development and “community” represents the influence of other members of one’s faith on one’s sense of identity. “Lifestyle” constitutes the impact of “religious socialization” on behavior (p. 98). Finally, “ego permeability” involves “the extent to which a person experiences and thinks of him/herself as a spiritual being” (p. 99). And of course, these aspects of life influence one another as well.

One aspect that may especially impact the formation of spiritual identity is an individual’s family. In Baumbach, Forward, and Hart’s (2006) survey of college students

from private religious institutions, they found significant positive correlations between participants' perceptions of frequent communication about spirituality with their parents and participant identification with parents' attitudes concerning spirituality. Lawton and Bures' (2001) study of Catholic- or Protestant-raised individuals indicated that the childhood experience of parental divorce increases the likelihood that an individual will change his/her religious affiliation, either to another religion or to none at all, by nearly 62 percent. Similarly, in Zhai, Ellison, Stokes, and Glenn's (2008) study of young adults, those who had divorced parents were more likely to consider themselves "spiritual but not religious" and significantly less likely to consider themselves "religious" than were those whose parents were still married (p. 379). Further, the adults who were younger than fifteen years old when their parents divorced were even more likely than the other adults to identify as "spiritual but not religious" (p. 391).

Another factor that plays a role in spiritual identity formation is the media. Clark (2002) notes that although narrative fiction in TV, film, and other mediums "have often been understood as direct competitors to the traditional beliefs and values of organized religion . . . not all people experience the media in this way" (p. 794). In her ethnographic study of U.S. adolescents, she outlines five ways in which teens view the connection between media, religion, and themselves. Traditionalists see the supernatural and moral messages of the media and their own religion as contradictory; intrigued teens want to separate the two, but have difficulty doing so; mystical teens have interest in the supernatural and minimal connection to religion; experimenters actively seek information about the supernatural from the media; and resisters embrace non-traditional views of the supernatural while challenging organized religion. With these findings, Clark (2002)

“reframed the question that tends to see media and religion in competition, pointing out that neither is wholly determinative of an individual’s religious identity” (p. 808). Instead, she argues for “an understanding of the cultural contexts that shape and limit how teens may come to understand religion, its stories of the supernatural, and their own relationships to these things” (p. 808). In addition to secular media outlets, Mullikin (2006) discusses the availability of religious-themed television programs, music, and non-fiction, self-help, and fiction literature to religious and/or spiritual individuals. Her study of undergraduate students showed a significant positive correlation between self-identifying as religious and making media choices that are religious or spiritual. The conclusions of each of these studies support the idea that spiritual identity development is socially constructed.

Kiesling, Sorrell, Montgomery, and Colwell (2006) looked at spiritual identity development and applied Marcia’s (1966) identity status model. Marcia (1966) highlighted four identity statuses: identity achievement, moratorium, foreclosure, and identity diffusion. In Kiesling, Sorrell, Montgomery, and Colwell’s study, which consisted of interviewing participants who held reputations as “spiritually devout,” they found that these statuses described their participants’ spiritual identities. Achieved individuals were categorized as having made “personally defining commitments” in their spirituality after going through a time of “exploration or crisis” (p. 1274). Those in moratorium were still in the stages of exploration or crisis and had not yet committed to a clear sense of spiritual identity. Foreclosed individuals were very steadfast in their spiritual commitments but had not experienced an exploration stage or any alternatives



for their spiritual identities. Finally, identity diffusion was not a status assigned to any of the respondents.

Kiesling, Sorrell, Montgomery, and Colwell (2006) also came to five conclusions about the development of spiritual identity in adulthood, based on the interview data. They found that spirituality provided the participants with a sense of connection to their deity, community, and self; the answers to “spiritual meaning-making questions” (p. 1276) were found in communication with significant others; many of the participants were motivated to continue their involvement in spiritual communities and spiritual practices by their struggle to actualize aspects of the self that they valued and to reject those they did not, and this struggle also formed their sense of spiritual identity; participants said that intentional effort was needed for the growth of their spirituality; and “patterns of both continuity and change” (p. 1276) were reflected in the participants’ spiritual identities.

Mahoney and Pargament (2004) focus on spiritual change in the sense that an individual experiences some sort of inner spiritual transformation rather than the conversion to a new religious group. They discuss spiritual change from two different Christian perspectives: one based in traditional Western theology and one based in feminist theology. Both types of conversion involve a change in which “the identification of the self with the sacred itself becomes the ultimate source of significance” (p. 483); however, the means necessary to reach this goal are different according to each perspective. In the traditional model of Western Christianity, a person must reject the self in order to put God and others before the self. In the feminist view, a person must “turn toward the self” (p. 485) and establish “a healthy sense of self and

personal autonomy” (p. 486) so as to avoid allowing relationships with other people to stand in for a relationship with God.

Both of these models point to the significance a self’s relationship to others has on an individual’s spirituality. “‘Self-exaltation’ and ‘self-abnegation’ are presented as equal dangers to the human psyche” (Mahoney & Pargament, 2004, p. 487). In the traditional model, a person’s “cardinal sin” is “taking a prideful ‘one-up’ stance toward God and other people” (p. 484); in the feminist model, “excessive dependence on others for one’s identity” that keeps the person from an “authentic” relationship with God is the cardinal sin (p. 485). In either case, the way a person views his/herself in relation to others affects his/her spiritual identity. Likewise, both a spiritual change that causes an individual to begin to place more importance on God and others than on the self, and one in which an individual moves God to the center of his/her life in place of relationships with other people, will have inevitable effects on the person’s relationships with others. Mahoney and Pargament’s (2004) understanding of spiritual change again supports the idea that an individual’s spirituality and his/her relationship to others are interrelated.

### **Narrative**

“Identity is a narrative of the self; it’s the story we tell about the self in order to know who we are” (Hall, 1991, p. 16). For this study, I’ve followed in the footsteps of scholars who have taken a narrative approach to studying the construction of spiritual identity. According to Poll & Smith (2003):

Individuals achieve spiritual identities by linking their life stories to the narratives of a religious community system and to their ongoing stories of personal revelation from God. These spiritual narratives may give individuals a sense of

life continuity through eternal life stories and of connection to God through spiritual self-to-God story themes. One's sense of a storied spiritual self may develop through interactions with God that may be partially unconscious and symbolic and partially conscious and schematized. (p. 132)

Social constructionism may imply that our lives are "multiple, fragmented and incoherent" and that "we have a multiplicity of different selves, each called forth or conjured by our immersion in discourse and in the process of social interaction" (Burr, 2003, p. 141). And of course we can only understand our identities, and explain them to ourselves and others, for that matter, to the extent that our language limitations will allow us (Harré, 1985, Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Cronen, Pearce, & Changsheng, 1989/90; Burr, 1995, 2003; MacDonald, 2009). Even still, we often *feel* that our lives make coherent sense (Burr, 2003) and we find a sense of "unity" as a self in the stories we tell ourselves and others (Harré, 1998). Through story-telling, we construct this sense of coherence. According to the narrative paradigm, we seek to create a story that "'hangs together,'" "is free of inconsistencies" (Fisher, 1985, p. 349), and that will "'ring true' to life as we would like to live it" (p. 362).

A healthy life narrative can be described as one that is seen as "internally coherent, makes for a continuous plot line in which early events 'cause' or logically lead to later events, embodies closure and a sense of things fitting together into a final form, and is aesthetically appealing" (McAdams, 1996, p. 314). Spence (1982) defined these as characteristics of what we view as "narrative truth," or something we see as a reality (p. 31).

Gergen and Gergen (1986) agree that narratives demonstrate this sense of coherence, or “connectedness,” as well as “a sense of movement or direction through time” (p. 25). Similarly, Sarbin (1986) conceptualizes stories as having a “temporal dimension” that takes the form of a “beginning, a middle, and an ending” (p. 3). “In summary, narrative understanding is the comprehension of a complex of events by seeing the whole in which the parts have participated” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 22).

In order to make connections across time and to coordinate our past, present, and future, we rely a good deal upon our memories in constructing our stories of self-understanding (Crites, 1986; Crossley, 2000; Burr, 2003):

Memory allows us to look back on our behaviours and experiences, to select those that seem to ‘hang together’ in some narrative framework, literally the stories of our lives, and to look for patterns, repetitions and so on that provide us with the impression of continuity and coherence. (Burr, 2003, p. 141-142)

While memory may not be the most “accurate” resource for creating a story of one’s life, from a social constructionist perspective, what matters is how a person constructs or perceives his/her identity rather than determining whether or not the memory represents what “really” happened. Furthermore, when telling ourselves or others our life story, we can’t possibly explain every detail of the journey and are therefore “selective” about what we say (Burr, 2003, p. 143). But again, this shouldn’t deter us from examining people’s stories in an effort to understand their self-constructions. “As writers, researchers, humans, we cannot record everything we experience. But this constraint should not preclude us from sharing our stories” (Tullis Owen, McRae, Adams, & Vitale, 2009, p. 195). As Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011)

point out, “the essence and meaningfulness of the research story is more important than the precise recounting of detail” (sec. 4.3, para. 4).

In the act of sharing our stories, we also may co-construct them and our sense of self with others (Ochs, 1997; Crossley, 2000). The stories we tell about ourselves are “crucially affected by the person who is serving as listener” (Crossley, 2000, p. 68). What’s more, we depend on others to validate our self-narrative claims by supporting our versions of the stories we create for our lives and identities (Burr, 2003; Poll & Smith, 2003; MacDonald, 2009). “Every person’s life is populated by a few significant people who have a major impact on the narrative, for example, parents, children, siblings, spouses, lovers, friends, teachers, co-workers, mentors, and so on” (Crossley, 2002, p. 71).

In maintaining the importance of both the personal and social influences on identity, however, we must recognize that “we are nevertheless the authors of our own stories. Even where the self and self-narratives are seen as jointly produced, we must at least have as much agency in their production as our co-authors” (Burr, 2003, p. 147). According to Alma and Zock (2002), “From this point of view, identity formation cannot only be thought of in terms of construction and sociocultural influences; the concept of personal receptivity is also needed” (p. 3).

“Narrative is absolutely central to art, spirituality, community, and a sense of self, and thus encodes human desire at the deepest levels” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 180). In order to explore how individuals construct their spiritual identities, we must consider how these individuals “construct stories that make their world coherent” (Pearce, 1989, p. 21).

**Theoretical Framework: The Coordinated Management of Meaning**

It is clear from the discussion above that “coherence” is a term commonly featured in the literature on narrative and life stories (Spence, 1982; Fisher, 1985; Gergen & Gergen, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1988; McAdams, 1996; Ochs, 1997; Crossley, 2000; Burr, 2003). This concept is also important to Pearce and Cronen’s theory, the Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM):

Coherence refers to the process by which we tell ourselves (and others) stories in order to interpret the world around us and our place in it. It specifically does not assume that these stories are an accurate description of ourselves or of the world. (Pearce, 1989, p. 21).

Pearce and Cronen (1980) present four types of coherence. Mutual incoherence occurs when neither interactant is able to interpret a message. When there is unilateral coherence, only one interactant is able to make sense of the message. Symmetrical coherence, or coordination, is present when each interactant *believes* he/she is able to make sense of the message and the interactants’ interpretations are able to guide subsequent acts in the interaction. Finally, asymmetrical coherence involves one interactant misleading another into believing he/she understands the interaction, when he/she actually does not.

There are two other terms that are important to understanding this theory, one of which, “coordination,” has already been mentioned. When interactants achieve coordination, they are “managing the ways messages take on meaning” (Cronen, Pearce, & Harris, 1982, p. 68). “It specifically does not presume that those who ‘coordinate’ their actions ‘understand’ each other or ‘agree’ about what they are doing” (Pearce, 1989,

p. 20). In other words, coordination can be achieved without mutual coherence in meaning (Griffin, 2006). Finally, the third important term is “mystery,” which represents the understanding that the stories we use to interpret our world could potentially have been constructed differently and are the products of human makings, and therefore no matter how “enmeshed” a person is in these stories, they cannot be “reality” (Pearce, 1989).

Undoubtedly, CMM is a social constructionist theory. CMM supports the idea that “persons-in-conversation co-construct their own social realities and are simultaneously shaped by the worlds they create” (Griffin, 2006, p. 66, 68). “In CMM, not only are contexts in which meaning is constituted *socially constructed*, but so also are the selves that participate in the social construction process” (Cronen, Pearce, & Changsheng, 1989/90, p. 8).

In CMM meaning is organized according to a hierarchy of levels that influence interactants’ interpretations. These levels include constructions (level 1), construction systems (level 2), speech acts (level 3), episodes (level 4), and life-scripts (level 5).

Cronen, Pearce, and Harris (1979) provide descriptions of each level:

Level 1: Constructions are “the cognitive process by which individuals organize and interpret the world as perceived” (p. 25); this is the process by which we give meaning to our experience.

Level 2: Construction systems consist of clusters of constructions from level one that are organized into groups according to one’s beliefs and purposes, as produced by one’s constructs.

Level 3: Speech acts are actions “one person does to another by saying something” (p. 25); for example, the act of telling someone “I’ve decided to become Catholic” would be considered a speech act that might be seen as “providing news” or perhaps “sharing a disclosure.” Both the content of the message and the relationship between the interactants is important for meaning on this level.

Level 4: Episodes are communication routines or activities made up of “sequences of speech acts” (p. 26). These set the stage for the rules followed by the speech acts in the interaction. Examples of episodes include a date, a competition, a business meeting, or a Catholic mass.

Level 5: Life-scripts are “patterns of episodes” (p. 26) that constitute a person’s expectations for the type of communication that may occur and that he/she sees as consistent with his/her identity (Pearce & Cronen, 1980). Examples of life-scripts include role-related titles, such as a mother, younger brother, student, or Christian. Especially significant for this study, as it is examining people who have transitioned into a new faith, is the idea that we might change our life-scripts through interaction (Cronen, Pearce, & Harris, 1979).

Each level of the hierarchy of meaning contributes to the context of a message, and interactants’ interpretations of a message vary according to context. In order to determine how a particular message should be interpreted within a particular context, interactants use constitutive rules (Pearce, Cronen, Johnson, Jones, & Raymond, 1980). Consider, for example, the speech act of telling someone “I’ve decided to become Catholic.” If the receiver of this message is someone who also belongs to the Catholic faith and possesses a Catholic construction system, he or she may consider this “good



news,” while someone with a different religious background may not. And if this information is disclosed during an argument between the interactants, the receiver’s interpretation of the message may be different than his/her interpretation during another type of episode, such as a mass. The context (in this case, the type of episode and the construction system held by the message receiver) influences the receiver’s interpretation of the message.

Interactants also use regulative rules in conversation. Regulative rules refer to “the way actors organize meanings to guide sequential actions” (Pearce, Cronen, Johnson, Jones, & Raymond, 1980, p. 23). Regulative rules guide interactants’ behavior and creation of messages, and affect the ways in which they respond to the messages they’ve interpreted with their constitutive rules (Cronen, Pearce, & Harris, 1979). According to Cronen, Pearce, and Harris (1979), constitutive and regulative rules work together in the following way:

A message produced by one person is interpreted by the others’ constitutive rules. These construed meanings then function as antecedent conditions of the interpreter’s regulative rules, bringing various amounts of “logical” and “practical” force to bear on particular actions. The act selected is expressed in a message according to the constitutive rules and, when interpreted, becomes the antecedent condition of the other person’s actions. (p. 29-30)

In this study I examine how the levels of the hierarchy of meaning interact as the participants find meaning in their spiritual identities; and to a lesser extent, I examine how constitutive and regulative rules can work together in the interpretation and creation of messages about spiritual identity. I look at the interaction between levels in order to

stay consistent with CMM's "holistic" approach to communication; CMM considers that each level in the organization of meaning is important to the overall context of a message (Cronen, Pearce, & Changsheng, 1989/90, p. 8). Similarly, Sarbin (1986) sees narrative as "an organizing principle for human action" (p. 9):

The narrative is a way of organizing episodes, actions, and accounts of actions; it is an achievement that brings together mundane facts and fantastic creations; time and place are incorporated. The narrative allows for the inclusion of actors' reasons for their acts, as well as the causes of happening. (p. 9)

Indeed, stories are a major facet of CMM, which explains that we create coordination when our stories lived mesh with others' stories lived "in a way that makes life better" (Griffin, 2006, p. 72). Stories lived are our "life experiences" and "when shared coherence is high, (1) stories told reflect with some fidelity the stories lived; (2) stories told match stories heard; and (3) constructive outcomes are not prevented by untold or unknown stories" (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008, p. 180). "Stories told are the narratives that we use to make sense of stories lived" (Griffin, 2006, p. 72).

As Pearce (1989) explains, "part of what it means to be a human being is to be a storyteller" (p. 21). By listening to the stories of my participants, I have attempted to find out how each constructs him/herself as a spiritual human being in relation with others. CMM is a valuable theory to use in this undertaking, as it acknowledges the limitations that language places on our understanding, addresses the personal and social influences on understanding, and describes finding "insight into lived experience" rather than the "pursuit of certainty" as its goal (Cronen, Pearce, & Changsheng, 1989/90, p. 36).

“CMM is a realist theory, but not in the objectivist or individualist tradition” (Cronen, Pearce, & Changsheng, 1989/90, p. 3). In creating a “realist” theory, Cronen and Pearce have provided us with a tool that can practically benefit people in everyday life (Cronen, Pearce, & Changsheng, 1989/90; Griffin, 2006) and that takes “very seriously the view that communication is a process through which persons create, maintain, and alter social order, relationships, and identities” (Cronen, Pearce, & Harris, 1982, p. 85-86).

### **Conclusion**

The literature on social constructionism, identity, spirituality, narrative, and CMM has informed the following research questions for this study:

RQ1: How do individuals who have undergone a spiritual change view their spiritual identities?

RQ2: How do individuals’ relationships impact their understanding of their spiritual identities?

RQ3: How do individuals communicate their spiritual identities to others?

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

#### **Introduction**

I've used multiple qualitative methods in this study, including participant journaling, interviews, and member checks, in an effort to utilize the advantages of triangulation. This section will discuss the methods of data collection, describe the participants and methods of recruitment, and explain the approach to analysis.

#### **Data Collection**

##### **Participant Journaling**

The first method of data collection was participant journaling. Participants were asked to respond to a list of questions (See Appendix A) in writing over the course of one month and then return their responses to me either electronically or through the mail. All but one participant completed journal entries (this participant originally planned on completing journal entries but was unable to finish them and asked if he could participate in only the interview portion of the study, as he still wanted to contribute to the data). This resulted in 38 single-spaced, total pages of journal data from five participants.

There are a few reasons I chose this method. First of all, after completing an autoethnography about my spirituality and journaling about my experiences with spiritual transformation, I had a much better understanding of my own spiritual identity than I did before I engaged in these practices. Elizabeth (2008) argues that while many authors of autoethnographies recognize the therapeutic benefits of their research, participants are not often provided with the opportunity for self-reflection. I hoped that asking my participants to write about their experiences would give them the chance for therapeutic self-reflection. And, at the very least, the participants might benefit from creating written

records of their experiences, as narrative is a “primary vehicle for retaining experiences in memory” (Ochs, 1997, p. 201).

Furthermore, there are some advantages to having participants write as opposed to only speaking about their experiences. “[S]elf-surveillance is often a feature of speaking during a conversation, while self-castigation or self-recrimination is not uncommon afterwards” (Elizabeth, 2008, sec. 2.1, para. 4). Because spirituality is a sensitive topic for some people, I considered that some participants might not be comfortable speaking openly about it and therefore, may be less likely to disclose when talking to an interviewer. “Participant writing is thus a method of inquiry that can serve the interests of participants and researchers alike: it attends to the well-being of research participants whilst providing social scientists with access to rich qualitative data” (Elizabeth, 2008, abstract).

Finally, Elizabeth (2008) makes “a case for participant writing as a research method that might usefully supplement already existing techniques” (sec. 4, para. 1). Another benefit to this method was that I was able to use the participants’ journal responses to inform the questions I asked during their interviews, as I discuss next.

### **Interviews**

Besides journaling, I used interviews as another method in this research project. I interviewed all of the participants individually, except for two of the participants who are a married couple and whom I interviewed together. I chose to interview the couple together in order to examine how they might interact during the interview to co-construct their stories and understandings of their spiritual conversions and identities. They also

went through the process of becoming Catholic together, so I hoped to find out how they might work together during the interview to communicate that shared experience.

The interviews were conducted face-to-face, tape-recorded, and transcribed. I transcribed the participants' words as they spoke them, including most verbal fillers, pauses, non-standard pronunciation, laughter, stress/emphasis, and repair, "while keeping the transcript as reader friendly as possible" (Tracy & Muñoz, 2011, p. 68). The interviews ranged in length from approximately 42 minutes to approximately 73 minutes, and the interview data totaled 4 hours and 38 minutes and 93 transcribed, single-spaced pages.

The interviews took the form of reflexive dyadic interviews. Rather than simply asking the interviewee questions and listening to his/her answers, the reflexive dyadic interview also involves the researcher sharing his/her own personal experiences with the topic of research with the interviewee. "In this case, the researcher's disclosures are more than tactics to encourage the respondent to open up; rather, the researcher often feels a reciprocal desire to disclose, given the intimacy of the details being shared by the interviewee" (Ellis & Berger, 2003, p. 472). In reflexive dyadic interviews:

When telling the story of the research, the interviewers might reflect deeply on the personal experience that brought them to the topic, what they learned about and from themselves and their emotional responses in the course of the interview, and/or how they used knowledge of the self or the topic at hand to understand what the interviewee was saying. Thus the final product includes the cognitive and emotional reflections of the researcher, which add context and layers to the story being told about participants. (Ellis & Berger, 2003, p. 472)

This approach therefore addresses some ethical issues. An important characteristic of qualitative studies is the need for the researcher to be reflexive. This interview approach required me to constantly reflect on why I might interpret the data the way I do and to consider any of my beliefs and experiences that might influence those interpretations. This method also aligns with CMM and the social constructionist approach that my research takes; the interviewees and I collaboratively constructed the interviews and our stories worked together to form the research results. Finally, it is important to avoid placing research participants under investigation, while keeping oneself as the researcher safely hidden from observation (Vidich & Lyman, 1998; Fine, 1998; Goodall, 2000). Reflexive dyadic interviews helped keep me aware of these ethical concerns as I strove to reflect on my own as well as my participants' experiences.

Although my intention was to conduct each interview as more of a conversation between the participants and myself than a question-and-answer session, I did prepare a list of questions to serve as a resource for initiating conversation or giving the participants starting points for discussing their spiritual journeys (See Appendix B). And as mentioned above, I had access to each participant's journal entries before I interviewed him/her, so I also asked specific questions of individual participants based on their unique journal responses.

### **Participants**

This study represents six participants' stories of spirituality. All participants are adults who did not grow up practicing the Catholic faith but became Catholic in adulthood. The participants include four females (21, 27, 56, and 59 years old), and two males (56 and 76 years old). Two of these participants are a married couple (both 56

people who know members of the Catholic community, to lead me to potential participants.

### **Approach to Analysis**

The data was analyzed using thematic analysis. This process began once I received journal entries from the first four participants who completed them and continued until after all of the journals were received and all of the interviews had been conducted and transcribed. Throughout the process, I looked for “converging interpretations” in the journal data, interview transcripts, and even in my own experience as a Catholic convert (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 241). The process began with thorough, line-by-line open coding in which I looked for phrases and ideas that appeared to be common across the data. I then grouped these codes into clusters of similar ideas, and then narrowed down these categories into the themes that were most representative of the data. According to Owen (1984), there are three requirements that an idea must meet in order to be considered a theme. It must be recurrent (at least two segments of data must communicate the same meaning, even if different wording is used), repetitive (the same wording is repeated in the data), and forceful (the meaning is stressed in the data through oral inflection, volume or pause, or through written underlining, italicizing, bolding, increased size, different coloring, etc.). Once I found themes that met these criteria, I applied CMM to the themes in order to answer the research questions.

### **Member Checks**

After analyzing the data according to the approach outlined above, I shared a first draft of the Analysis chapter of this study with the participants and asked for their feedback, suggestions, and thoughts on the write-up of the themes. Four of the



participants replied; these participants provided positive responses and no requests were made for changes to the analysis. The combination of using multiple methods of data collection and member checks theoretically improves the validation of the claims that I have drawn from the data (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

### **Conclusion**

The analysis of five participants' journal entries (one participant did not complete the journal entries) and five interviews (four of the participants were interviewed individually and the two participants who are married were interviewed together) revealed three pairs of themes that emerged from the data. The next chapter discusses these themes in depth.

### **Chapter 4: Analysis**

The participants' journal entries and interviews revealed three pairs of seemingly contradictory themes. Spiritual identity is experienced as personal, yet communal; spiritual identity is experienced as fixed, yet changing; and in expressing their spiritual identities, these Catholic converts must balance relationship concerns with the desire to be themselves. However, a closer look at these themes reveals that these ideas can coincide.

#### **Spiritual Identity As Personal, Yet Communal**

When asked what "spiritual identity" means to them, the participants used terms that referred to it as something "personal": "It is my personal spiritual journey, not exactly the same as anyone else's journey. It means my relationship to God"; "How I see myself as a Catholic follower of God. The way I connect to God"; "The essence of me, my true self"; "How I see myself spiritually- who I am, the type of person I am, spiritually speaking." At the same time, the participants also emphasized "spiritual identity" as something "communal": "It means belonging to a local congregation"; "How others see me"; "My spiritual identity shapes and directs: . . . how I treat myself and others; how I care for my own physical, emotional, and cognitive needs as well as those of others."

Spiritual identity as a combination of individual and social experiences is a theme that ran throughout the journal and interview data. One way this theme was expressed was in the participants' taking ownership of their decisions to become Catholic, but also recognizing the social factors that contributed to their new identities as Catholics. For

example, James (76) talked about the role that family played in his initial decision to become Catholic:

I think I probably knew in the back of my mind when I got married I was going to at some point. And uh then we started raising our family and I think we just- we have three children. And our oldest boy was born- I think I converted shortly after that. I just figured it was the best to have the family all go together and that kinda thing so. I kinda thought it was the thing to do.

Several times throughout his interview, James (76) explained that after becoming Catholic, later on in his life, he participated in a weekend retreat that affected the way he views his spiritual identity today:

Uhhh stronger than it was when I converted, for sure. And uh... and a lot of that has to do with uh back in 2007 I-I did a Cursillo Weekend which was a a kind of a retreat but it also helped you establish a more personal relationship with Christ. And so because a that it's much deeper.

See I guess my life changed with Cursillo because it did go back to that really. I guess I come away from that feeling that you really have to love God as much as you do your wife. In fact, realistically you need to love God first... before you can love anybody else. And that's when it uh really hit me.

I- just kinda something you said I think is reminded me of that's kind of the way I, I think about like you said you converted for God not for anybody that's what the weekend kinda did for me too.

Though his wife "never pushed" Catholicism on him, James "thought it was important . . . for both parents to go to church together with their kids" and he decided to

become Catholic. These social influences that were important to his initial conversion led him to strengthen his own personal relationship with God as a result of becoming Catholic and involving himself in the Church.

Mark (56) and Sandra (56) also converted to Catholicism after marriage; however, this couple made the transition together. The following conversation between them about the moment when Sandra decided to become Catholic represents not only the combination of personal and social aspects of their spiritual identities, but also how identity can be co-constructed in conversation:

S: And I had been thinking about it for so many years off and on and... and it's just sort of the culmination (laughs) of everything that had happened and then... and um. That was the feeling I got. And I think I even told you while-

M: Yeah, yeah.

S: It was on, yeah it's time, it's time for me to...

M: Yeah.

S: I think I said you know, with you or without you (laughs). It was gonna have to happen (laughs).

M: Yeah, I don't remember exactly when that was in the- but it didn't take very long with RCIA before I decided I wanted to you know-

S: Oh yeah.

M: This is what I wanna do. It was like only a couple weeks it seems like.

S: And it wasn't long at all-

M: No-

S: He- he went with me at first just to... just, I didn't want to go to RCIA by myself-

M: So I was like, okay, I'll come-

S: I'll go with (laughs)-

M: Along but I'd really rather crawl in a hole and not think about religion for a while, okay-

S: (Laughs) but he did (laughs).

M: And uh yeah I think the first time we came to mass I, you know I liked it immediately. It's like it made sense. Yeah.

Although they were at different points in their individual spiritual journeys (according to Sandra, Mark was "very resistant to looking into Catholicism" but for her, becoming Catholic was going to "have to happen" with or without him), Sandra still asked Mark to go to RCIA "just to keep me company." However, supporting his wife by attending RCIA and mass led to Mark wanting to become Catholic himself. Though initiated by Sandra, they made the transition to Catholicism together. Furthermore, this shared experience is communicated in the way they agree with one another and echo each other's thoughts throughout the above excerpt. In recalling the experience, they co-create a shared meaning during conversation.

Heather (21) had a similar introduction to the Catholic Church as she originally began attending mass with her sister and former boyfriend because they invited her. However, she felt frustrated when others assumed she made the decision to become

Catholic because her boyfriend at the time was Catholic, and she felt even more frustrated when she realized that her (now ex-) boyfriend assumed this as well:

Oh... when [he] said, *wull*- I broke up with him, and then he goes- but- this is like part of the thing, like trying to make me feel guilty or something- he's like, but you became Catholic for me, I was your sponsor. And I was like, well thank you for being my sponsor, that meant a lot to me because (pause) I needed... somebody to help that knew a lot about being Catholic and... it was *nice* of you to offer and *be* there and go to the classes and stuff. And I was like, but... I didn't... become Catholic... because of you. It was a *plus*, because it- we would both be Catholic... And I was like, but... it was *not just* because- like, it was *not* because of you. That's *not* the reason. Like only reason. That was a- like a *good* rea- like that's like, yay we're, I can- we can get married in the Catholic Church and stuff. But it was not (pause) it just made me mad . . . And I don't like that he thought that was the *only* reason I became Catholic. Cause it's like, you were my *sponsor*, why would you think that? That it was revolving around you... you know? It- that's... changing your (pause) *belief* on *God*... should *not* rev- like, be centered around... a *boyfriend*. So I was offended. And I was like, well I'm glad I'm breaking up with you (laughs).

While this participant was adamant that she became Catholic for her own spiritual growth ("I wouldn't change my entire spiritual journey because of a guy. I wanted to become Catholic for me."), she also seems to be struggling to communicate this idea in the above excerpt. She goes back and forth between claiming that her boyfriend was not *any* part of the reason she became Catholic and claiming that he was only *part* of the

reason (“it was *not just* because- like, it was *not* because of you. That’s *not* the reason. Like only reason.”). This is a good example of our need to claim our own identity, but to somehow reconcile this need with the idea that we are still influenced by others in many ways.

This idea surfaced at multiple times during Heather’s interview and in her journal entries. While she emphasized how important this step was for her *because* she made the decision *herself* (“*I chose* that I wanted to become Catholic- I wasn’t *born* Catholic. So I got to *decide* to be Catholic . . . I appreciate it more because it was my choice.”), she also recognized the role that significant others played in this decision:

I decided to become Catholic when my sister . . . asked if I wanted to become Catholic together with her. I felt really honored that she wanted to take the classes together and felt really lucky that she gave me the push to do it. I am not one to go out on my own and get involved like that, she really deserves a ton of credit for me becoming Catholic because I couldn’t have done it without her. I’m really thankful she asked me if I had ever considered it, because I had, but didn’t know how to go about it. Once we started taking the classes, I really was happy that I decided to start the journey to become Catholic with my sister.

I related a lot to Heather’s experience because I met my boyfriend Kurt at a Catholic church long before I ever considered becoming Catholic. When I did decide to become Catholic, I figured that some people in my life might assume I was doing so because he was Catholic. At first I wasn’t too concerned because I told myself that it didn’t really matter what others thought since God knew what was in my heart. However, it was important to me that my *parents* understood I was becoming Catholic

for God and not for my Catholic boyfriend. Their initial response (“Oh, because of Kurt?”) made me realize that it did matter how others saw this decision. Like Heather, I really wanted to take ownership for this decision, and that desire was fueled by my parents’ reaction. Still, with the advantage of hindsight, I can now say I believe that my relationship with Kurt *fostered* my understanding of Catholicism and *facilitated* my transition to this faith (though, as Heather said, “that’s *not* the reason”). I continued to attend the Catholic church not only because I enjoyed it, but also because of my relationship with him and other friends who attended. Eventually, these social circumstances led to my personal spiritual transformation.

Likewise, Catherine’s (27) grandmother played a major role in her faith journey; she describes how her close relationship with this significant other both drew her closer to and further away from the Catholic Church:

When I got older, she was also much more intent on helping me to learn about the Catholic faith than she had been before. She taught me how to pray the rosary and explained to me a bit more about her faith than I had known before. She gave me my first rosary and our family Bible along with my first prayer book, encouraging me to learn as much as I could about the faith, and offering to talk with me whenever I had questions. When she passed away three years ago from cancer, it was incredibly difficult for me to even enter a Catholic church again. I spent the next two years struggling with the knowledge that I wanted to become Catholic and unable to keep myself from breaking down whenever I went to church because everything reminded me of my grandmother. Even so, it was



largely her influence which helped me to make the decision to begin RCIA classes anyway.

Catherine further explained, “I didn’t want to make the decision because I... was grieving for her either,” supporting the idea that her main reason for becoming Catholic had to be for her own spiritual growth, and not because of a relationship with another person. For Catherine and these other participants, the decision to become Catholic was ultimately up to each of them individually, but they were impacted by the actions and words of significant others in their lives who helped inform that decision. Still, this impact can be transforming, as James (76) alluded to when talking about his grandsons who have not been as involved with Catholicism as he’d like them to be: “Actually what we’re hoping for, Stephanie. . . what we’re prayin’ for is that most of ’em will find a good Catholic girl (laughs).”

Clearly, support from other people was especially important for these participants as they transitioned into a new faith. Anne (59) explained that one reason she hadn’t become Catholic sooner was because of the “impersonal” atmosphere of the two large Catholic churches in her hometown: “I always found that kind of put me off... because I, I felt I would be lost in that.” Additionally, no one ever mentioned RCIA to her. It wasn’t until she moved to another state that she became Catholic and found the community she was looking for:

And, um... in this *particular* Catholic community I just feel really blessed. Like, [our priest] I think is wonderful. Um I volunteer . . . I’ve met a lot of people who have really rich faith lives and, and I like being part of that.

In fact, the idea of a Christian community was mentioned by all of the participants as something they valued. James (76) again discussed the retreat he had been on and the influence of the “talks,” or presentations delivered at the retreat, versus the influence of the people there on his faith:

I’m not so sure, Stephanie, it was as much the talks as some of the people that I’ve met. Really. I think the whole, the whole weekend you know, and the attention and the, the uh, the Christian love that was... that was shown in the weekend. You know, really. I mean the talks, yeah there’s some- I can’t remember offhand but for me, I tend to be more of a people person and as far as the notes and so forth I just am terrible at taking ’em and I would much sooner just sit there and listen to ’em but I, I did take some and if I would go back and look at them I’m sure there would be some meaningful things there. But I, I just uh. I absorb more by the contact with people and the interaction with people. And I think that’s how I affect people better myself.

Many of the participants mentioned the beauty of being connected with other Catholics across time and space, as Anne (59) did when discussing mass: “It’s like, when I attend mass I just think you know I’m connected (pause) you know with *all* the other, all the saints, you know, all other Catholics, it’s- it’s so much bigger than just right here.”

And she again brought up the subject when discussing communion:

Sometimes when I’m in the pews, I am always overwhelmed when people are going up to communion. Like just the lines of people. I- sometimes I’m overwhelmed with how holy they all are. Like, they’re all different, all different walks of life, but everybody is holy. Like, at that, you know, holy, like,

connected with God. It's like there's- we're all the same. You know. But it's people from just all walks of life. And I'm *overwhelmed* sometimes with that. The holiness of the whole experience. It's like, you know, I- I'm not even putting words to it right.

In her journal entries, Sandra (56) also points out "how amazing it is to think about the entire Church praying and worshipping at the same hour throughout the world" when discussing "a global simultaneous one hour prayer of Eucharistic adoration organized by the Vatican." Later in their interview, she and Mark (56) bring up the idea of connection again:

S: And I just like, you know, this is the way Christians worshipped... umpteen years ago. You know, back in... practically the very beginning. This is. This is what they said, this is what they believed, this is...

M: Uh huh.

S: And I just think that's really... I like that. A lot. The continuity of that and being in that. You think about all the believers, you know, throughout the... centuries and I just- I just really like that.

M: Yeah. It's neat to think about, you know, almost like it really is one big family from the beginning.

Community was also specifically noted as something *necessary* to one's spirituality by some of the participants, as Heather (21) explains below:

Because you need the sense of community and like growing with the church and people around you. And [some people say], oh I can do it on my own. But when you're in that type of atmosphere, it's like. You feed off of other people, and...

you just, you *need* to be around other people that believe in what you believe in and can like. It's just the right pla- you just, you *need* it, you can't be- you can't be... a *Christian* without the church. Or, well obviously you can't be Catholic without the Church.

Particularly important to the participants was the sense of community offered through the RCIA program. For example, James (76) converted to Catholicism in his twenties when the process of becoming Catholic was very different from the process as completed through the RCIA program today. He described his preparation as follows:

When I converted, the sessions I had with the priest were just so dry. You know it was just- now, this was before Vatican II and just sit there and kinda lecture and course, I was... like 20 years old. I was much younger and... young and dumb as they say and and was not in a real good frame of mind to accept a lot a that stuff. You know just too deep for me. But that's the way it was at the time, that's that's why I have continued do different things you know in the way of retreats and RCIA and being involved in our own parish.

He is now involved with helping others to become Catholic through RCIA at his church and believes this is benefiting him in his faith life today:

It's fun, it's fun. It um... kinda helps me learn more about my faith about the Catholic faith too. That's uh to see the people grow in their faith and and it's good. I just uh... it just allows me the opportunity to be involved with people I foresee to be stronger in their faith than, than I am. You know. So you learn from them too, other team members, you know. Kinda thing. It's a sharing... a faith-sharing experience for everybody I think.

Further, some of the participants emphasized the significance of sharing the RCIA experience with other people. As Catherine (27) wrote:

I did appreciate RCIA from the beginning, however, because I knew I wasn't just going to go through this process alone. We had a large number of people attending RCIA, some with similar backgrounds as myself, but most just wanting full communion in the Church since they hadn't been confirmed. I didn't feel so out of place as I might have if I were the only one going through the program at the time.

In fact, Heather (21) wasn't sure that she would have participated in RCIA if she had been the only person doing so:

And then [my sister] said that there were classes and we could take 'em together. And like I *liked* that we would take 'em *together*. Cause if I- I don't know, I feel like if I had to take 'em *alone*, with just like a teacher . . . I would feel more uncomfortable if it was just me and they asked me a question I didn't know. I'd feel kinda bad. So, like, I liked that it was a *group* thing because it was easier- it made it less... like... pressure. It made it lighter. And more fun. Like, cause everyone got to share what they were thinking. But I think if it was just me I wouldn't- I, I don't know. I probably wouldn't- I don't know if I would be able to- at that time- taken that like huge of a step. Alone.

Finally, the influence of other people on the participants' spiritual journeys is evident in the negative experiences some had with their former Protestant churches that pushed them away from their former Christian denominations or from Christianity as a whole. Many times, these negative experiences were tied to the actions or statements of

their fellow churchgoers. As Mark (56) put it, “it wasn’t so much something that led me toward the Catholic Church as it was led me you know away from where I was.”

Mark (56) and Sandra (56) explained that in their experience with the Evangelical denomination, with which they had previously been affiliated, the churches were often “geared for people who are healthy and young” and this affects interactions with or responses toward older members:

S: The programming... uh and I think it’s especially true in the larger churches. The programming... the leaders are often young, like forty, thirty- to me, that’s young (laughs). A little different perspective here (laughs). Um... and it’s very- and that, that’s a good thing, I mean it’s geared toward families with young children. Which I think is good. But, at the same time, often the older people are either kinda pushed aside or they have their own fellowship, their own group. And that’s not always true, I still go to a bible study with friends, you know, at a local Evangelical church. And they have their, you know, thriving seniors group. But yet... just the expression of it, the faith is... it’s just sort of... young. It’s um. Get out there, do this, do that. You know, I don’t- can you explain it any better? I mean, it’s like- (laughs).

M: You know, for us too I think a lot of the years we picked and associated with churches based on the program-

S: For the children-

M: That they had for our kids.

S: Mmhmm.

M: We thought met their- their needs and I think we made, you know, many good decisions that way, but it does seem like the programming is geared toward that in that many churches, you know, if you visit they're only really interested in you, you know, reaching out to you if they see you fitting that stereotype or something.

S: Yeah when we visited churches, we were... it was very different when we- after you know, the kids were doing their own thing. And we would visit... no children, the reaction was very different than when we had you know were younger and had the kids with us.

For Catherine (27), the anti-Catholic atmosphere and "lack of acceptance" at her former non-denominational church are what caused her to explore other faiths. "I really think it was the conversations I was having with people- the *most*- that started driving me (laughs) in the direction of Catholicism. Especially, like... the bigoted notions of um, certain Protestants against the Church." Instead of influencing Catherine to also think negatively about Catholicism, their statements had the opposite effect on her:

But I mean like, that horrified me to think that there was a Christian group out there that was ranting and railing about other Christians. And um. That started making me turn to listen to more what my friends [who were becoming Catholic] were saying about the Catholic Church. Because they were talking about, like unity and (laughs) stuff like that. I'm like, that's *such* a different message.

Additionally, her experiences with leaders at this church impacted her decision to ultimately leave:

Another factor which made it very difficult for me to want to be a member of a church again . . . was the way some of my ministers/pastors had handled

confidentiality when I came to them with problems in the past. Time and again, I had ministers/pastors telling other people in the congregation and my family about what we had talked about in confidence, or making it into a church matter behind my back. Ultimately this tended to result with my own personal embarrassment or ostracism from certain members of the congregation, and at times hostility (which was the most surprising). Most of this occurred while I was still in high school or just entering college, so it unfortunately shaped my idea of the church body for a while.

These issues with confidentiality led to Catherine's apprehension with the idea of confession once she did begin the steps to becoming Catholic: "I think this was the one thing I worried the most about throughout the whole process, right up until I had to actually go to confession..." and "needless to say, I wasn't thrilled with the idea of putting my trust in anyone else." And because of all of her negative experiences with this particular church, Catherine said "there was a brief period of time after I left that I wasn't even sure whether I wanted to continue to pursue the Christian faith." Similarly, after an incident that occurred when the senior pastor of the Methodist church she was attending unjustly fired her youth pastor over monetary issues, Heather (21) began to question her identity as a Christian as well:

That was when, like, I didn't want to go to church anymore. Was when after that whole thing [with my pastor] and it fell apart and then we were going back and forth to churches and I just didn't want, even want to be a part of the church. I was like . . . oh I can do it on my own . . . But I- was not in a good place, meaning like... I didn't even want to (pause) be a part of anything. I almost was like... how



can a like a *pastor do that*. You know what I mean? Cause I was like, I thought of- at that time- I thought of a pastor how *now* I think of [a priest]. I saw [my pastor] as that type of person. And well *now* I don't. But at that time I thought of him so highly. And I was like how can somebody like... so *involved* with God and the church be that horrible of a person. And then I was just like, well that's not for me. And then I kinda didn't even want- I don't know, I just. I was almost not even wanting like to *believe* anymore. It was *awful*. Like think about if that happened to *me* think about how many people... in that youth group or church felt that way too. He did *a lot* of damage.

These experiences didn't result in an immediate transition to the Catholic faith, and in some ways impeded the transition to the Catholic faith if the participants considered leaving Christianity altogether; but they did cause these participants to begin to question their current beliefs or to explore other Christian denominations. Leaving their former churches was the stepping stone that eventually allowed the participants to consider the possibility of becoming Catholic. Once again, the influence of others' actions sparked a change in their spiritual identities. Furthermore, in reflecting back on these negative experiences, the participants were able to compare them to their positive experiences with their current faith communities and find confirmation in their decisions to become Catholic, as I will further discuss below.

### **Spiritual Identity As Fixed, Yet Changing**

There were a few ways in which the participants communicated that their spiritual identities are both fixed and changing. First, some talked about their spiritual identities as not having changed much as a result of converting to the Catholic faith because they

believe the Catholic Church's teachings and ways of practicing the Christian faith aligned with the beliefs they personally already held before converting. On the other hand, some said that through the process of conversion, they began to better understand Catholicism and to accept and adopt aspects of this religion that they may not have before.

Interestingly, most of the participants fell into both categories.

For example, Anne (59) explained, "I think before I became Catholic, I was in churches that were so close to Catholic." For Anne, the Catholic religion was seen as similar to the religions with which she had been involved in the past, the Lutheran and Episcopalian (Anglo-Catholic) denominations:

It was more... um... kind of like, getting myself going at it. Like responding to that little voice. Because what I always wondered, and I can remember this even when I was going- a girl going through Lutheran confirmation. Comparing Catechisms and I thought, I remember with my cousins [who were Catholic], and I'm like, well these are almost the same. And, um. You know, the differences are politics, not theology. And... I had this sense that I wanted to be Catholic cause I thought... that's the- that's, historically that's the *original*. You know, it's like going *back* to you know like Saint Peter. You know (laughs). And I wanted, somehow I just felt that's right.

Although the basic beliefs she already held and that she considers most important were not completely changed as a result of becoming Catholic, she did mention ways that this transition affected her spirituality:

One way my spiritual identity has changed is that I have a much deeper understanding of the sacredness of each life. In addition, I have a deeper

awareness of how sin separates me from God. I have a much deeper appreciation of the sacrament of reconciliation.

During our interview, we also discussed how becoming involved with the Catholic faith made the pro-life issue a more important one for both of us:

Stephanie: So and that's really important to me and I think that that's like... part of the reason... one of the things I especially related to even before I became Catholic was just the pro-life cause. . . .

Anne: And, when you talk about like pro-life, you know, um... it's (pause). I- I have to admit it's something that (pause) never... I never was like at the forefront, and I think a lot more about that now. But, when I think of pro-life, I- I think of it beyond the abortion issue. Um, you know, I've worked with people with mental illness, developmental disabilities, how do we treat people with disabilities? Isn't that pro-life? You know, promoting quality of life. Um... how... for me, the death penalty. You know. You know, so extends, and I find that um that might be a change. That, that has been more of an issue that I pray about. You know. It was something that I never really gave much thought to prior to becoming Catholic.

Stephanie: Yeah I would say, probably when I started college because when I was a freshman that's when I started to come to Newman even though I wasn't Catholic yet. But um I joined the Students for Life and everything and *then* like it started to click for me even though I still hadn't planned on becoming Catholic I just like... I just like agreed with everything that they said [about the pro-life cause]. Even though I hadn't really thought about it before.

Sandra (56) also described her conversion to Catholicism as “in a very real sense, adopting formal religious beliefs that conformed to what I already believed.” She didn’t see her own beliefs as “meshing” with those of the former Protestant churches she attended. She explained, “I felt confined and unable to be myself” in Protestant denominations:

Well, definitely the Catholic faith... is more, *suitable*... for my identity. (Laughs) if that makes any sense. At all. It’s just more of who I am I think. So I don’t see it changing me as much as- I mean in some ways it will. I think as you expose yourself to the creed and mass and like [Mark] was saying, you- you do change... but yet, as far as your fixed... personality, that type a thing. It just seemed, um. (Pause) To fff... to fit, or actually be more myself than I was, you know. In the other uh relig- or, denominations.

While Sandra says she sees her “spiritual identity as being ‘fixed’ (more or less),” she also did acknowledge that it isn’t *completely* fixed:

I think *part* of who I am spiritually is fixed. Sort of like your... personalit- certain aspects, I guess it depends on what you believe psychologically too, but um. It’s sort of... there. Just your way of maybe being spiritual or relating spiritually to things. Is- is- fixed, but it can have the... different um... you know, as you embrace a different belief or whatever, certain *aspects* of it’ll change. I guess the outer expression of it maybe would change. But not so much the inner aspect.

Catherine (27) and Heather (21) also saw the Catholic faith as better fitting their own beliefs and preferences than their previous denominations did. Catherine wrote:

Eventually, I started asking for literature from my friends who had recently converted to Catholicism and started to look online at Catholic resources. The more of these I read, the more I realized a lot of my own beliefs aligned with the Church's teachings.

And Heather explained: "I knew I wanted to become Catholic after spending almost a year (I think) going to Catholic Mass and seeing/learning the differences in the service" (compared to her previous religious affiliations). "I don't know... It just felt more- it just felt like a church. How it should feel."

However, both Catherine and Heather had to overcome some conceptions they held about Catholicism before they could accept its teachings as their own, as Heather talks about here:

I always thought that it was like strict and... like with the *pews* and... yeah- I don't know. You just... you *don't know* cause it's like out of your comfort zone. And like... I don't know. I just thought that it was way stricter and it's not, it's just (pause) now that I am Catholic, like I just see it as like, I don't know I don't see it that way. I just believe it and what it stands for so it doesn't seem strict to me.

Catherine experienced something similar:

Many of my experiences with the Church had been listening to the priest talk about sin and repentance or the sacrifice of Christ in a downcast light, and it made me view the Church as being a very negative witness, or having a very negative focus rather. I approached going to Ash Wednesday with a firm detachment because I didn't want to change my mind at this point in the RCIA process. Instead of sitting up towards the front like we were supposed to, I sat towards the

back of the church. A line by the back wall caught my attention and I sat there distractedly watching the people lingering around, wondering why they weren't sitting down. When the confessional door opened and the next person went in, I realized what was going on and something just suddenly clicked for me. The whole idea of repentance, forgiveness, and community as one had been a completely foreign concept and it really just took attending that one mass for me to get a better understanding of the nature of the Church and the necessity of *being* a member in that community. I don't know if I would have come to that understanding without RCIA, or at least not so quickly. Getting the background in theology weekly, coupled with attending mass regularly and seeing the theology put into practice opened my mind to the idea that there is obviously something *more* going on than what I was observing or knew about.

Furthermore, some of the participants compared their newly adopted beliefs to the ones they were taught at their previous churches in order to explain why the new beliefs made more sense to them. As Heather described:

I had a lot to learn and still do, but after the [RCIA] classes and comparing what I learned to what I thought before the classes and my previous experiences in non-Catholic Churches, I realized it was the right decision. I feel like the previous church I went to was just making its own rules and messages as they went along. Looking back I am thankful that I went to that church because it brought me to where I am now.

More specifically, Mark (56) and Sandra (56) explained that they preferred the Catholic view of suffering to their previous church's view:

M: Yeah the whole idea too about suffering, I think is hardly even mentioned [in the Evangelical denomination]. You know, if anything well it's something, you know, if you're sick it's something to be gotten over. It's nothing that might be valuable about it. And I think the Catholic Church really tries to show you that it's an experience that can be positive. For people.

S: That's true, there is no theology of suffering at all. It's just not developed. Some people might mention things about it, you know, being- having a positive effect, but. There's no real theology of it.

Catherine (27) discussed the following two areas in which she realized a Catholic teaching or practice better matched her own beliefs than did the non-denominational church's:

I attempted to continue to attend services [at the non-denominational church] until the youth minister told me that my baptism was invalid because I was baptized as an infant. This was the major turning point for me, because it was the first time that I realized some of my convictions actually aligned with the Catholic faith, and also that there were an awful lot of contradictory beliefs within the Protestant faiths due to the multitude of denominations available for one to attend.

I really hadn't considered the idea that I had lived a great deal of my life believing that spiritual identity is passive until yesterday. I've been thinking about this a great deal since then, or rather when I realized it wasn't passive at all. . . . The idea of actively coming up through the church to accept Christ at the altar was the first time that I think I really understood just how active one had to be to really possess their spiritual identity.

Finally, Heather considered the service's strong focus on the pastor's message or "opinion" at her previous (Methodist) church to be problematic. She felt the focus of the Catholic mass on the Eucharist was more consistent with her own beliefs on how a worship service should be conducted:

The whole, like the *main* thing is at the *end* when- and, it's just good. You know?

It's just like the way I would- how *I* picture a, a service should be. Not everyone sitting in their chair- I like that. And I also like that we *kneel*. As much as it hurts my knees, I like that we *kneel* at the most important times. Because it's like, we're in the presence... of Jesus when we're taking it, so we *should* be kneeling. And we're not like (pause) I don't know. It's just way better this way.

In fact, the concept of the Eucharist was something mentioned by all of the participants. Many were drawn to the Catholic faith because of the Eucharist, or came to better understand and appreciate the Eucharist through becoming Catholic (or a combination of these). Anne (59) wrote, "I became Catholic because I longed to receive the Eucharist." Mark (56) described his spiritual identity before becoming Catholic as having an "absence of Christ in the Eucharist," and described his current spiritual identity as having "a great deal to do with the Eucharist. The understanding that Christ is actually present." Sandra (56) wrote in her journal about mass:

As often happens my husband was brought to tears by one of the hymns that was sung before Communion. Later, we talked about the Real Presence and how meaningless Communion seems when people don't believe in the Body and the Blood.



For Catherine, it took a while to understand the idea of communion from the Catholic perspective when she had grown up learning a very different teaching on it:

Mentally, I was shocked that we were kneeling and praying in front of a wafer. . . . Something that had never really been a problem before suddenly slapped me in the face so startlingly and it was very clear that *this is* what was meant regarding transubstantiation: that the presence of Jesus *is* in the host. . . . When I was finally able to rectify this in my mind, I was having a hard time grappling with the idea of taking communion. This was before my first confession, so naturally I was experiencing issues of feeling like maybe I wasn't worthy to take the Eucharist. What finally resolved this conflict for me came during another mass. During the homily, what happens during mass was equated to a marriage ceremony, which just suddenly seemed to make so much more sense. I find it interesting how certain forms of imagery can help in resolving misunderstandings, especially when someone is unwilling to just ask a question for clarification.

As I read this excerpt from Catherine's journal entries, I also found meaning in this metaphor. Changing my understanding of the Eucharist has probably been the hardest part of my transition to Catholicism and is something that I continue to try to grasp. I felt a tightening in my chest and a strong sense of anxiety as I read her words; guilt crept forward as I realized that I don't place enough importance on this element of the Catholic faith. I believe this is similar to Heather's (21) experience as she described her discomfort in thinking about how she used to view receiving communion compared to how she views it now that she accepts the Catholic teachings about the Eucharist:

I think... I just really wanted to take communion. Because, I *did* like taking it... at the... at [my former Methodist church]. But, it was like once a month and then once I saw it was taken every day. Or, every service [in the Catholic Church]. I was like... it made me realize that it was *really* important. And then I thought-like, I heard more about it and *why*. I think [my sister's boyfriend] was the one that was talking about why it was so important. And how it was *actually* Jesus. And we weren't- it wasn't just like representing how He died for us. And I was- it made me like feel uncomfortable that I couldn't... *actually receive Him*. And I- cause I didn't *think* that, and it's like, it made you feel like *bad* because you thought like the other way. It made *me* feel bad. . . . I thought. Like, *less* of what it *really* meant.

Through their conversion to Catholicism the participants were able to find a religion that is compatible with certain beliefs they already held, or they realized that certain Catholic beliefs and practices that they hadn't held before now make sense to them. Additionally, many of the participants reported a combination of these experiences. In this sense, their spiritual identities can be considered both fixed (they adopted a religion that fit who they already were spiritually) and changed/changing (they changed or are continuing to change aspects of their spirituality to fit a religion that now makes sense to them).

Each of the participants also used more literal phrasing to refer to his/her spiritual identity as something that is changing. The participants described their faith as "evolving," an "ongoing thing" or "ongoing process," a "spiritual journey," "something I am continuing to develop," and "something in formation." Some described themselves as

“struggling,” “striving to be a better follower,” “a child in my faith,” seeking “to better align myself with my newfound faith,” “working towards better understanding my faith,” having “rediscovered my passion for learning about and growing in my faith,” and continuing “to adopt Catholic devotions and practices.” As Mark (56) put it:

I think it is something like entering a big church or cathedral. At first you see what is in front of you. Then you look to the sides. Then up. Then higher up. . . . There is always more to experience and discover.

Although these terms and phrases refer to spiritual identity as something that does change and when asked if they foresee any changes in their spiritual identities in the future the participants all replied that they “hope so” (in the sense that they want to “continue to grow,” “be open to wherever God chooses to lead,” “learn about my faith more,” and “become more involved” in the future), none of the participants expect to go through the process of converting to another Christian denomination or religion again. “I think I can see some changes in my spiritual identity occurring over time, but I don’t see myself ever coming to a point where I would want to leave the Catholic Church, or no longer identify as Catholic” (Catherine).

Heather (21) explained, “I feel like a better person now. Kind of, like I’m on the right path.” In her journal entries, Sandra (56) wrote that she and Mark (56) “would never want to go back to the faith from which we converted.” And Catherine (27) explained in her interview:

I spent a lot of time in prayer and a lot of time weighing the pros and cons of my decision because I knew once I joined the Catholic Church, that was gonna be a

life-long commitment for me. It wasn't just gonna be I feel like I wanna be Catholic now, and later on maybe I won't be.

She also said, "while I may struggle at times with my faith," the Catholic Church "is where I belong" and "I never really found my spiritual identity before I became Catholic." Thus, even though the participants believe their spiritual identities will develop over time, their commitment to being Catholic is seen as a permanent change.

Anne's (59) words seem to best represent the way the participants felt about their identities as Catholic Christians: "I think in my heart, I feel like I've come home."

### **Balancing Relationship Concerns and Identity Expression**

The participants' newfound sense of "home" in their developing spiritual identities is not something that is always easy for them to express. Because all of the participants converted to Catholicism from other Christian denominations, telling people they were becoming or had become Catholic implied that they shed certain beliefs held by their previous denominations in exchange for the beliefs held by the Catholic faith. This was something that posed difficulty for some of the participants as they told significant others of their decision to convert. Sandra (56) explained, "I wanted to give family members and close friends some reasons for converting without appearing to pass judgment on the beliefs I was leaving behind."

Sometimes, this results in the participants feeling as if they can't fully express their reasons for becoming Catholic to significant others in their lives:

I just explain that I felt more comfortable in a Catholic church and that I feel like the Mass is more fitted to my beliefs. I don't want to insult them in any way so I

just leave it at that because some of my family can be a little touchy with the subject. (Heather)

Heather (21) further explained that because of this concern, she avoids the subject of spirituality with one particular significant other in her life who still belongs to the denomination she left behind:

Cause I don't- [She] just doesn't want to hear it cause she gets offended. . . . we chose to become Catholic and she takes it as us thinking that what she believes in is *wrong*. But it's just a different type of belief...

And then I felt like [she] was kinda like, well *why*? You know like, what- what's so wrong with what I'm doing? Like she thought of it that way. Which, I mean (pause). I could see that because when I- before we became Catholic we were like, well why can't we have communion? You know (laughs). So I could see that. But I just... like, I don't- that's why I don't talk to her about it because I don't want her to be- to think I'm talking down to her or saying that what she's doing is wrong. Cause it's *not*.

Catherine also described a conversation with a friend in which she didn't feel she could fully express her identity:

This one was unaware that I had just joined the Catholic Church and reacted extremely angry over this discovery. . . . The changes in my own demeanor he attributed to some manner of 'brainwashing' which likely only furthered his dislike for the Church. I feel kind of torn. I didn't realize that bringing this up would upset him so much, but I'm really upset that the insinuation here seems to be that the only person who would want to live a life devoted to God is either

brainwashed or brainwashing people. Out of respect for our friendship, I didn't press the matter, but in so doing I can't help but feel like that was a misrepresentation of our faith. With how angry he was, however, I didn't want to turn everything into an argument and only further fuel whatever issues he has with the Church either.

Similarly, when she was asked why she became Catholic by a member of her former church with whom she now works, she only gave her a few surface-level reasons. "And so, you know, I didn't want to like insult her or anything. Um but I wanted to be honest." Catherine explained the difficulty of "finding that balance between communicating what I'm passionate about with people and not wanting to insult them. . . it's like an interesting dance of walking on eggshells."

One way that some of the participants dealt with the desire to both maintain relationships and express their identities was to use more indirect means of communication, such as social media, as an initial way to communicate their developing spiritual identities to others. Sandra (56) and Mark (56) used Facebook to tell their friends that they were becoming Catholic. They set their religious statuses to "RCIA" and then to "Roman Catholic" and referred to this as "the safe way to do it" because they "tried to keep it kind of low key." Similarly, Catherine (27) maintained a daily blog throughout the season of Lent reflecting on her experience as she went through the process of becoming Catholic. She posted the link to Facebook each day and liked communicating her identity in this way:

That's kind of why I like being able to talk to people over the Internet a little bit more. Cause I can take some time to think about what I'm going to say. And use

a thesaurus (laughs) to find words that are going to *mean* what I'm going to say... instead of... just opening my mouth and inserting my foot (laughs).

She also explained that this blog “kinda helped me not be self-conscious about becoming Catholic because I realized . . . I could see like daily we had a hundred and fifty people reading whatever it was we were written, I felt like I had support.”

Besides being concerned about offending others, many of the participants also thought that their family or friends might have misconceptions about their new faith. Heather spoke of someone close to her, saying “she just thinks that like... it's a boring service, and like it's so strict and crazy. But she's never been to one... she doesn't really know...” And Sandra (56) wrote in her journal:

I was most concerned about how my mother might react. She is a member of an independent Baptist congregation. Many Baptists that are fundamentalist in nature can be anti-Catholic. They do not necessarily consider Catholics Christian. Though I didn't feel I needed my mother's approval, I also didn't want her to think my husband and I were hell-bound for converting. ☺

Many of the leaders and members of Catherine's former non-denominational youth group also consider the Catholic religion to be a cult and the act of becoming Catholic “ungodly.” Thus, when she did share with them some of her experiences with transitioning into the Catholic Church and the new ideas she was embracing, some of her Protestant friends were “worried” about her as they did not have the same understanding of her new faith as she did. However, “a couple of them have actually told me that having seen the way that I practice my faith has kind of changed their minds on how they see Catholicism. To a *degree* (laughs)” (Catherine).

In fact, expressing their identities through their actions, rather than explicitly explaining their spiritualities in words to others, is another way that the participants manage the tension between maintaining relationships and expressing themselves. When asked if she thinks others are aware of her spiritual identity, Anne replied “I think I try to live what I believe. And by doing that I would hope that they would see it.” Heather explained that they see it “through my actions and what I... say and do. It’s like. You can’t just say that you’re... practicing... Catholicism. Or like saying that you’re a Christian without showing it.” Catherine wrote, “I do think that what a person believes fundamentally affects their actions and impacts their personality to a degree which cannot be ignored.” Sandra emphasized these ideas as well:

But people seem to know or... or I might say something, you know. Something... pro-life or... or just. I don’t know, just doing something . . . if someone gives you too much money back, givin’ it back- you know, just things like that. But um. Not pocketing the extra change or whatever. Um. I’ve- but as far as overt I don’t generally do anything. Um, sometimes I’ll wear a cross or a crucifix but not always.

Finally, James provided another example of communicating his spiritual identity through actions rather than words, and how this allowed him to avoid a potential conflict with a customer:

I have a barber shop here . . . and um (pause) I had a couple customers that uh get a little... foul-mouthed once in a while. . . . And he used to use the Lord’s name in vain for a bit and it really kind of bothered me. And I um... uh... I didn’t know quite how to handle it. I didn’t want to just- well, I was afraid of losing my



customer for one thing. Which is probably not the way to do it- so anyway, after Cursillo, I uh prayed about it . . . so I finally decided I was gonna put a crucifix up in my shop. And my shop is divided into two, a waiting room and the work area. And so I put the crucifix in the header in the work area, so when they lay back for shampoo, they had to see it (laughs). And uh, I don't know . . . but he cut back on his language. . . . Cause prior to Cursillo I- I probably encouraged it for both cases by not objecting to it, you know. And lettin' 'em know that I didn't appreciate it, y'know. So. And uh I guess it's an example of actions speak louder than words. I put the crucifix up and I didn't have to confront 'em verbally myself which I.. I don't see myself being very good at (laughs).

Even though each of the participants highly values his/her spiritual identity and all spoke of how this part of their lives shapes other aspects of their lives ("my spiritual identity is at the center of everything else . . . central to who I am"), they don't always feel comfortable completely expressing this significant part of themselves to other people. In interactions with certain individuals a participant may express only a surface-level part of his/her spirituality in an effort to avoid offending others or feeling misunderstood. Additionally, the participants may choose to allow their actions to speak for them, rather than openly discussing their spiritual identities with others. In this way, they can still express their identities publicly but not quite as overtly. As Catherine wrote, "in essence, I see my spiritual identity as something I'm more willing to act according with rather than as a person apologetic and private in my beliefs and faith." On the other hand, sometimes the participants are content to experience their spiritualities as personal relationships with God with aspects that may or may not be evident to others:

And a course obviously some of the things are more in here (points to chest) than they are openly where people can see 'em. Y'know. Some things will shine through you know, the glow will shine through ya with some people. But some of the benefits are in here, how you feel about yourself too. (James)

## **Chapter 5: Conclusions**

### **Concluding Thoughts**

The themes that emerged from the data revealed that the participants experience their spiritual identities as personal and communal, and fixed and changing. With certain people in their lives, they also must balance the urge to express their identities and the desire to maintain amiable relationships. In this final chapter, I discuss these themes using CMM, offer theoretical and practical implications of this study, address the study's limitations, and suggest potential areas for future research.

### **Summary of Findings**

The purpose of this study was to explore the following research questions through the theoretical lens of CMM: How do individuals who have undergone a spiritual change view their spiritual identities? How do individuals' relationships impact their understanding of their spiritual identities? How do individuals communicate their spiritual identities to others? The following addresses each of these questions by applying CMM to the themes analyzed in the previous chapter.

#### **Spiritual Identity as Fixed, Yet Changing**

How do individuals who have undergone a spiritual change view their spiritual identities? To answer RQ1, in some ways the participants see their identities as "fixed" in the sense that becoming Catholic did not completely change them spiritually (they found a religion that matched certain beliefs they already held) and/or in the sense that they do not foresee themselves making major changes in the future (through conversion to another denomination or religion). On the other hand, the participants also saw their identities as "changing" in the sense that they have adopted and/or continue to adopt

certain Catholic beliefs and practices that they did not possess before conversion and in the sense that they hope to continue to develop as Catholics in the future.

By applying CMM's hierarchy of meaning to the participants' understandings of their spiritual identities, we can see that two levels are especially important in making sense of their experiences: the construction systems level and life-scripts level. The participants see their life-scripts as "Christians" as fixed ("God has been with me for as long as I can remember, and . . . He'll be with me no matter what happens in the future"). Therefore, certain constructions that they already held before becoming Catholic, the ones held by all Christian faiths, are fixed. Having already possessed a Christian construction system, as well as certain *Catholic* constructions that did not match up to their previous faiths but that they personally agreed with before they became Catholic, aided in their embracing the Catholic life-script. On the other hand, for some of the participants, their new life-scripts as Catholics led to changes in their constructions as they learned to embrace the Catholic perspective on elements of Christianity (such as communion and confession) that they may have misunderstood or disagreed with before. These levels are interdependent. Their life-scripts as Catholics shape their construction systems and their construction systems warrant their identification as Catholics. This interdependency will likely continue as none of the participants plan on discarding the Catholic life-script in the future.

### **Spiritual Identity as Personal, Yet Communal**

The experience of spiritual identity as both personal and communal also provides an answer to RQ1. The participants talked about their spiritual lives as a combination of individual ("the way I connect to God") and social ("belonging to a local congregation")

experiences. It is interesting to note, however, that even when the participants emphasized the more “personal” aspects of their spiritual identities, they did so in reference to their “personal *relationship* with God.” As is true of all roles in life, their life-scripts as Christians and Catholics can’t exist apart from a relationship to another “self” (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934), in this case, God.

The idea that spiritual identity is personal and communal also provides answers to RQ2: How do individuals’ relationships impact their understanding of their spiritual identities? Besides their relationships with God, the participants spoke of other people as playing a part in their spiritual transformations. The participants’ conversions were tied to relationships with people in the Catholic faith who introduced them to and/or encouraged them to pursue Catholicism, support from others as they transitioned into Catholicism, sharing the conversion experience with others in RCIA who converted at the same time, feeling connected with other Catholics across time and space, and/or the negatively perceived actions of individuals at their former churches that caused them to consider other faith options.

According to Cronen, Pearce, and Harris (1979), “the combination of culture and circumstance provides a life-plot which can be modified to some extent” (Cronen, Pearce, & Harris, 1979, p. 35). The participants noted certain circumstances, people, and interactions that modified their life-scripts as Christians and led to their adoption of the Catholic life-script. Certain episodes (attending mass with family or friends, participating in RCIA classes, going on a retreat) and speech acts (a former minister deeming his/her baptism invalid, hearing communion equated to a marriage ceremony) led each participant to conclude that his/her construction system aligned with the

“Catholic” life-script and/or to better understand Catholic constructions and incorporate them into his/her life-script.

An example of the interplay between each of these levels of the hierarchy can be found in my own experience. When I told my boyfriend Kurt of my decision to become Catholic (speech act), my construction system informed the meaning I found in his response (he told me he and his mom had been praying for God to lead me to the Catholic faith). My belief that prayer actually works (construction), which falls under the Christian construction system, led to my positive interpretation of Kurt’s response and further shaped my decision to convert (I found confirmation for this decision in his statements). Furthermore, the fact that he had not told me he had been praying for me until that moment prevented me from reacting negatively. At that moment, I had already begun to accept Catholic constructions as my own. Had he told me he was praying for me to become Catholic before I had considered the possibility myself, I probably would have been annoyed, possibly angry, and definitely more resistant to Catholicism (because I would have felt that he was “pushing” his religious beliefs on me). However, I actually felt relieved and reassured at the thought that God had answered this prayer; God really did want me to take this path toward a new life-script. The circumstances surrounding this speech act and both my already existing constructions and developing construction system facilitated my adoption of the Catholic life-script.

These levels of the hierarchy that created the context of our messages in this episode shaped our interpretation of one another’s messages according to our constitutive rules; in turn, our interpretations informed the regulative rules we used to create our responses to one another’s messages. First, Kurt’s constitutive rules informed his

interpretation of my message (the disclosure that I wanted to become Catholic). The context of the message (he possesses a Catholic construction system and life-script; I was emotional as I explained to him why I was beginning to agree with Catholic teachings and practices, which framed the decision as one I was not making lightly) led to his interpretation of it as a positive and significant message. Additionally, the fact that *I* brought up the idea of becoming Catholic created a context in which it would be “safe” for Kurt to outwardly support this transition; Kurt was not asking me to consider converting, I was informing him that *I wanted* to convert. This interpretation informed Kurt’s regulative rules, which guided him to view the act of telling me he had been praying for me as an “appropriate” one. The constitutive rules I used to interpret his message were also dependent upon the context. Had the timing of his message in relation to my changing construction system been different, I may have interpreted his message negatively. I had to come to the conclusion that I wanted to become Catholic on my own *and* had to reveal this information to Kurt before I could hear that he and his mom had been praying for me, otherwise I would have felt that they were trying to make the decision for me. Due to the particular context, I interpreted his message positively, as one of support rather than pressure. And, his actions again influenced my understanding of my identity because I felt more certain that I should become Catholic after telling him. I found a sense of coherence between my initial desire to do so, and Kurt’s confession that he and his mom had been praying for me to take this step. It was as if I needed to take ownership of the decision to convert, but at the same time believed God was leading me to the Catholic faith and a new life-script through the significant others He had placed in my life.

Though identity is often viewed as something personal and individual, the strong focus on community and relationship that emerged from the data in this study is unsurprising. The Catholic religion revolves around community and connection, as is evident in Catholic literature:

God created us to be in relationship with him and with other human beings. We are *created* to be *related*. Why would this be so? Because God himself is a related being. God is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is the Father loving the Son and the Son loving the Father. The love between them is so intense and real that this love is, in fact, another person- the Holy Spirit. While being three distinct persons, God is in fact a profound unity. God the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct but inseparable. We are created in the image and likeness of God. Human beings are like God. We are distinct, but inseparable. We are related-beings. Relationship is the name of the game. It is what life is about. (Percy, 2005, p. 23)

Additionally, although Western culture is often uncomfortable with ambiguity and contradiction, as the above excerpt represents, the Christian bible and Catholic literature seem to embrace it. Therefore, the themes of spiritual identity as both personal and communal, fixed and changing, make sense when we consider the culture and construction systems of these particular participants' religion.

### **Balancing Relationship Concerns and Identity Expression**

Lastly, how do individuals communicate their spiritual identities to others? The answer to RQ3 depends upon a few levels in CMM's hierarchy of meaning. When the speech act is the disclosure of the decision to become Catholic, the way this news is



expressed differs according to the relationship between the interactants. This is consistent with CMM's recognition that both the content of a message and the interactants' relationship are significant to its meaning, and that each interactant in a speech act "overtly or tacitly presents a definition of himself [*sic.*], of the other, and of the relationship between them" (Cronen, Pearce, & Harris, 1979, p. 34). For example, while the participants were candid with me, a fellow convert, about their decisions for leaving a previous Christian denomination, some only gave surface-level reasons for leaving when informing people who still belong to those denominations and with whom they still hope to maintain relationships. In this way, they are able to achieve coordination with those significant others. Though a participant may have a very different understanding of his/her reasons for leaving a previous faith and/or for joining the Catholic faith than does another person to whom he/she discloses, the point is that they continue to coordinate their actions and maintain a relationship. As the participants' stories revealed, sometimes coordination is achieved "*because* [the interactants] assign different meanings to certain key messages" (Cronen, Pearce, & Harris, 1982, p. 68) and sometimes "the purpose of, or response to, a message may be as much a function of the relational act performed as of the content" (Cronen, Pearce, & Harris, 1979, p. 34).

Once again, the interactants' constitutive rules, as informed by the context in which the disclosure and subsequent messages took place, shaped their regulative rules that guided their responses to one another. I'll use another example from my own experience to illustrate this. When I told my dad that I wanted to become Catholic, it was very soon after I had come to this conclusion. He first assumed that I was making the decision because my boyfriend Kurt is Catholic. But as I explained my reasons to him, I

became overwhelmed with emotion and began to cry. I also started the conversation very seriously, with the words, “Dad can I talk to you for a second?” The highly emotional setting and serious tone I set created a context that led to my dad interpreting my disclosure as something that was extremely important to me. His regulative rules led him to conclude that the best response in that situation was to hug me and tell me he was proud of me. On the other hand, I told my mom about my choice to convert at a later date when I had become more accustomed to the idea and, therefore, when I told her I did not experience the same emotions I had when I told my dad. I also relayed this information to her over the phone, rather than in person. Thus, the context of this message shaped her interpretation (by the end of the conversation, I could sense that she still was not convinced that my reasons for becoming Catholic were not based on Kurt and that she didn’t understand how important this decision was to me). Needless to say, I regretted the way I communicated my decision to her.

In addition to sharing their conversion decision with others, the participants also communicate their identities in other ways. When it comes to expressing their identities on an everyday basis, the participants see their life-scripts as Christians as a determining factor in the way they live their lives (“My spiritual identity shapes and directs: my definition of right and wrong”; “I’d like to have [my faith and career] *one*. Instead of like juxtaposed with each other”; “I think I’ve become maybe a little more aware that your everyday, you know, actions affect other people. And you really need to live like you’re accountable for that”). This is to be expected, as “life-scripts refer to that repertoire of episodes that a person perceives as identified with him/herself, the array of interactive situations that are consistent with a recognition of ‘this is me’ or ‘this is something I

would do” (Pearce & Cronen, 1980, p. 136). Living according to the life-script of “Christian,” and taking on new life-scripts and construction systems according to the Catholic faith in particular, affect the participants’ actions. In turn, their actions represent a way they express their life-scripts as Catholics. As Anne (59) explained:

As I receive Christ in the Eucharist, I try to allow Christ to use me to feed people who I meet during the week; I try to respect each individual through the practice of love, compassion, forgiveness. I try to reflect the joy I have when I receive Christ in the Eucharist to everyone I meet.

### **Theoretical Implications**

According to Roehlkepartain, Benson, and Scales (2011), “there are three persistent critiques of current theory and research on spiritual development (which echo discussions related to identity development)” (p. 551). These are:

(a) that they too often reflect an individualistic, Western worldview that focuses narrowly on the self and self-fulfillment; (b) that they presume that a spiritual tradition or identity is “inherited,” rather than being actively shaped by the person as agent of her or his own development; and (c) that they describe linear, predictable pathways that do not account for the dynamic processes of spiritual formation or the interplay of persons and their contexts. (p. 551)

As a result of taking a communication perspective and applying a communication theory, CMM, this study addresses the above concerns. The data (a) indicated individual and social experiences of spiritual identity; (b) revealed that the adult participants actively chose to pursue a faith different from the one they “inherited”; and (c) accounts

for the contextual influences on the participants' identities as well as the unpredictable, often nonlinear paths that led them to Catholicism.

In addition to adding to spiritual identity research (and meeting a need for research in this area outside of the discipline of psychology), this study also adds to CMM research. CMM has been applied to many areas of communication, but this study offers a rare opportunity to use it in spiritual identity research. Furthermore, this study has shown that the levels in the "hierarchy" of meaning can work interdependently in the meaning-making process, rather than sticking to an organized hierarchical order. The participants simultaneously adapted their life-scripts and construction systems to fit one another. They became Catholic because it "fit" some of their constructions, and they've changed some of their constructions to "fit" their life-scripts as Catholic. At the same time, certain episodes or speech acts that they observed or that occurred between themselves and others led them to the realization that their construction systems matched up with the life-script of "Catholic" or to the realization that they wanted these two levels of the hierarchy to match up.

This study also offers an opportunity to explore the use of constitutive rules in the interpretation of messages about spirituality within the context of the hierarchy of meaning, as well as the use of regulative rules in the creation of messages about spirituality and in response to messages about spirituality. In particular, it demonstrates how the context in which a message about spirituality is created can be crucial to the receiver's interpretation of the message according to his/her constitutive rules; the receiver's interpretation informs his/her regulative rules, which guide his/her response to the message; this response is then interpreted by the original message creator according

to the context and his/her constitutive rules, which again inform his/her regulative rules and subsequent response. This is consistent with Cronen, Pearce, and Harris's (1979) explanation of the cyclical relationship between constitutive and regulative rules.

The participants in this study also support the notion that interactants can achieve coordination with others even when their interpretations of messages and/or interactions differ. For example, the participants may avoid the subject of spirituality with certain people and/or conceal some of their reasons for conversion from certain people. In this way, they can coordinate their actions with people who still belong to their previous religious affiliations and maintain agreeable relationships with them, even though (or perhaps, *because*) they have different understandings of their reasons for conversion.

However, perhaps more gratifying for the participants is when they are able to achieve coordination *and* coherence, when their interpretations mesh with others' and they can disclose a bigger part of their identities without the fear of offending significant others or having their messages interpreted in ways they do not intend. As Griffin (2006) points out, when our stories lived complement the stories lived of others, we create coordination and make "life better" (p. 72). This research contributes to our understanding of narrative and shows that creating coherent stories that are consistent with others' stories plays a significant role in our sense of identity. I will further discuss the practical benefits of constructing a sense of coherence below.

Finally, social factors were important in the participants' ability to construct their sense of spiritual identity and to find meaning in their spiritual stories. This study supports previous identity research that sees internal and external aspects of identity as interrelated and highly interdependent.

### Practical Implications

The experiences of the participants in this study reveal a great deal concerning the importance of the RCIA program for the recruitment and retainment of new members to the Catholic Church. As already discussed, many of the participants were grateful for the opportunity to complete the conversion process with other people, rather than doing so alone. They also talked about the ways in which the program strengthened their spiritual identities (“I can tell that I have matured in my spiritual identity as a result of going through RCIA”) and understandings of Catholicism (“I’m glad we took the classes cause I didn’t know like *half* of the stuff. That they talked about”).

The leaders and members of individual Catholic churches may benefit from the insight that these participants have brought forward regarding their initial impressions of the RCIA program. Many did not know what to expect from the program or “had no idea about what RCIA involved.” Sandra wrote:

I expected RCIA to be an intellectual experience, one of mulling over doctrine, studying church history, etc. It was—but it became so much more than that, something almost beyond words to describe. Ultimately, it turned out to be about beauty, emotion, and faith, often found in unexpected places—often in the midst of what I most feared.

And Mark explained:

When we started RCIA in October, I thought that it stood for “Roman Catholic Information for Americans.” That was really what I was expecting: doctrine, theology, procedures, who’s who. It very quickly became a more personal journey for us; 2012 had been a rough year, and we had lost a few friends. The RCIA

journey was healing as we learned and experienced how God relates to us through his church, his son and his mother. . . . I would encourage anyone who might be thinking about RCIA, to join the next time it is offered. You will be surprised!

Raising awareness that the RCIA program involves more than studying and lecture, which may be a bit off-putting for some people, might attract more potential converts. What's more, it may attract people who are already Catholic. As James revealed, RCIA can be a faith-strengthening experience for *current* Catholics in addition to the people who are in the process of converting. These are important possibilities to think about, considering the statistics mentioned earlier concerning membership in the Catholic Church. (According to 2009 statistics published by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, the Catholic faith has lost 10.1% of Americans who were raised Catholic and only 2.6% of Americans have converted to Catholicism as adults.)

The visibility of the RCIA program may also need to increase in order to ensure that those interested in Catholicism are aware of the process, or even the *possibility*, of becoming Catholic. As mentioned before, Anne attributes part of the reason she waited so long to become Catholic to the fact that no one in her hometown ever mentioned RCIA to her. And Heather explained that although she felt a desire to become Catholic, she assumed she "couldn't":

I don't know. I just didn't know that you could switch. I- because it was so- I felt like, since I couldn't even take Eucharist, that I wasn't allowed. Like it was like really strict and you had to do like something extreme to... like, I didn't know it was just taking classes and *wanting* to. Which I *liked* that. That all you- that's like all you had to *do* is, if you really wanted to then *yeah*, they're letting you in.

Once she was informed that she could become Catholic through RCIA, Heather signed up for the classes and realized the importance of learning “what your denomination stood for.” She explained that, “*I didn’t know like... a lot... compared to... what I learned in RCIA,*” referring to the knowledge she gained about the Catholic faith through RCIA and the lack of understanding she had about the beliefs her previous denominations hold. Catherine also believes RCIA is important for this reason:

I actually really respected the program from the start, largely because this was something I wished more Protestant churches would do. Most of the churches I attended were good at digging into scripture and getting us involved in volunteer activities, but few of them really talked about the reasons for following their beliefs.

This study also offers practical value in supporting the notion that journaling can benefit a person in helping him/her to reflect on and better understand his/her identity. When asked if participating in this study had affected their spiritual identities in any way, the participants said that writing the journal entries helped them “reflect,” find “a lot better perspective,” “think back to *why* I became Catholic” and “how important it is,” and “kind of evaluate... where have I come from, where am I now, where am I going”:

I reflect on things a lot (laughs). So, it was like, it was just a more organized way of reflecting about um my whole faith journey up to this point. And I feel a lot more streamlined now... then like, before. When I- like I said, I have been feeling like I have a ton of directions to go in and not sure which one’s the best one. And I was going through looking for jobs, and doing that, it really helped me to clarify that whatever I wanna do for a career, I want to do as a spiritual career too. I want



it to be um... a blending of those two paths instead of just, well this is my job, but this is what I'm passionate about. So, that was very helpful. (Catherine)

Catherine's comments demonstrate the practical importance of the narrative paradigm. Writing about her spiritual identity helped her to see that she wants to find a sense of consistency between her work life and spiritual life, or to create a life story that is "entirely coherent or true to . . . the life that [she] would most like to live" (Fisher, 1985, p. 363).

Participating in this study also gave the participants the "discipline" to create a written record of their spiritual reflections that they may not have taken the time to do otherwise:

Mark: For me I think write- answering the questions and the journaling was something- I had thought about these things as... as we were in RCIA but I don't think I would have taken the time to record any of them or to try to put them in a form that someone else could read-

Sandra: That's right, yeah.

Mark: And you know I think that helped me understand a little more about what was going on-

Sandra: Yeah.

Mark: You know when you put it in writing it's different and I'm glad to have that, what I wrote. Cause I can refer back to it. Yeah.

Sandra: Yeah. That was helpful and I've- I kept mine too.

Putting their "stories told" into an organized form allowed the participants to not only document their experiences, but also make sense of their "stories lived." Further,

CMM tells us that when our stories lived match up with others' stories lived, we find coordination and shared coherence (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008). Each participant expressed interest in reading about the other participants' stories in the final thesis. I believe that seeing that their "stories told" match the "stories heard" in this thesis can provide a sense of connection for these participants, something that they revealed is important to their spiritual identities. After all, seeing that my story told meshes with the stories I've heard in conducting this research has certainly been a practical benefit for me.

When I completed my autoethnography about one year ago, I wrote that my spiritual identity was still tied to the denominations with which I had been involved before becoming Catholic. I saw myself as being a combination of Lutheran, Methodist, and Catholic. While I still believe my experiences with Lutheranism and Methodism were beneficial and influential in shaping my identity, now I am much more certain of my identity as Catholic. I've accepted this as my life-script. Even though my "spiritual conversion" officially occurred in April of 2012, I think that the most significant changes in my spiritual identity have happened in the past year. Completing this thesis has involved conducting research on spiritual identity, reading journals about spiritual transformation, having conversations with people about Catholicism and our respective stories of conversion, and spending great lengths of time analyzing all of this information. The combination of reflecting on my own spiritual identity throughout this process and connecting with the participants in this study has strengthened my faith and understanding of my spiritual identity. The personal and communal experiences I've come across as a researcher have been instrumental in my developing Catholic identity and in my confirmation that this life-script is a permanent one.

### Limitations and Areas for Future Research

While reflecting on one's experiences in words can be highly beneficial, one obstacle for any study on spiritual identity lies in recognizing "the limitations of language in adequately and accurately capturing spirituality as it is directly experienced" (MacDonald, 2009, p. 89). Of course there is a challenge in representing each participant's spiritual identity in so many pages, and there may be other events and experiences that shaped each person's spiritual identity but were not included in this thesis. But even beyond this, we also have to remember that as human beings our understanding is confined by the language we have available to us.

This limitation was evident in the data as the participants sometimes had difficulty translating their experiences into words. When answering certain questions, whether in writing or in spoken word, the participants occasionally voiced concerns like, "I'm not even putting words to it right"; "I don't know how to explain it"; "I don't know if that makes any sense or not"; and "Articulating this experience into words isn't something I've had to do before and I don't feel as though I could do it justice."

An example of the boundary language creates around our capacity to understand occurs in Exodus 3:14, which reads, "God replied to Moses: I am who I am. Then he added: This is what you will tell the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you" (*New American Bible*, 2011, p. 68). The endnote for this verse in the St. Joseph Edition of the *New American Bible* provides the following interpretation:

Moses asks in v. 13 for the name of the One speaking to him, but God responds with a wordplay which preserves the utterly mysterious character of the divine

being even as it appears to suggest something of the inner meaning of God's name. (p. 68)

Assuming the participants accept this biblical reference as a definition of God offered by Himself, which is quite ambiguous from the point of view of language-reliant human beings, can we expect them to completely conceive of who God is? And if not, can we expect them to ever completely understand who they are in relation to Him? The inevitable answer to these questions is that we cannot. After all, "selves can only exist in definite relationships to other selves" (Mead, 1934, p. 165). This could explain why the participants saw spirituality as a journey rather than as a fixed identity that can be neatly defined. If they don't ever have a definite understanding of their relationships to God, they consequently may never have a definite understanding of their spiritual identities. This, of course, makes them difficult to study.

Another potential language limitation could lie in the term "spiritual identity" itself. Although spiritual identity was clearly something that all the participants saw as a defining part of their lives, initially explaining what the term means to them was not easy. As James (76) explained, "it was certainly a thought-provoking two words."

Two of the participants laughed as they admitted they "googled" the term before answering the question about its meaning in their journal entries ("I was like, I think I know what it is, but I don't wanna be wrong... I never say that, I j- you know what I mean?"). Another explained, "you know spiritual identity you always think oh I'm a good Catholic and so forth but the identity part I guess was kinda... uh a question in my mind of how to answer that you know."

Additionally, the participants were in disagreement about the relationship between the labels “spiritual identity” and “religious identity.” Four of the participants (Anne, Heather, Mark, and James) believe there is no major difference between the two terms, as Heather explains below:

I think they’re kind of like the same thing to me. Like my religious... I- I feel like being spiritual and being religious is like the same thing for *me*. I don’t know. I don’t think that they’re... there’s any difference. Because like... the only time that I’m being spiritual is when I’m like connected... with what I believe in. Which is my religion. So I think of them as the same thing.

On the other hand, Catherine sees a “clear difference” and Sandra explains:

I think um... I don’t- to me, they’re not quite the same, spiritual identity and religious. Religious could be more of a, a label I guess, just my way of looking at it. And, whereas your spiritual identity could be more personal. It could go beyond labels, or beyond or include, either way. I guess I see ’em as slightly, uh, slightly different.

This brings up another limitation of this study. All of the participants in this study are active members in an organized religion. Thus, whether they see spiritual identity and religious identity as the same or different, both terms are important to their understanding of themselves as Catholics. Future research should explore the ways in which people who consider themselves “spiritual but not religious” experience and express their spiritual identities. Would community be as important to those who do not belong to a spiritual and/or religious group? Additionally, people of other religions or Christian denominations or people who have spent their entire lives practicing the same

faith may have a different understanding of their spiritual identities than the participants in this study do. Finally, how do people who have converted to Catholicism from a non-Christian religion or from no previous religious background experience and express their spiritual identities?

This study was not intended to be generalizable, so the themes presented in this thesis cannot answer these questions. However, this study does offer insight into the often neglected area of spirituality in communication research and provides a fresh perspective on a subject that is too often seen as a psychological phenomenon. I'd like to end with CMM's idea of "mystery" as it provides an interesting outlook on the ways in which we find meaning in communication. Pearce (1989) describes mystery as the "attitude that views one's own life and that of local society as a manifestation or part of something greater; it is a reminder of what is 'beyond' the immediate, present moment" (p. 23). This is particularly useful for a study on spiritual identity; the participants' spiritual identities extend beyond themselves and connect to other people, and most importantly are part of a greater being who is beyond their understanding.

Perhaps what makes spiritual identity so intriguing is that we can never truly grasp a full understanding of it. "Mystery is at once a reminder of the fallibility of the process of the social construction of reality, and of our emancipation from any particular set of stories and practices" (Pearce, 1989, p. 23). To ever generalize the experience of "faith" would be to destroy the mystery that necessitates the word.

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**Appendix A: Journal Prompts**

Please address the following questions and return your journal entries to Stephanie one month after beginning the journaling process:

1. What does “spiritual identity” mean to you?
2. How would you describe your spiritual identity as you see it today?
3. How would you describe your spiritual identity as you understood it before deciding to become Catholic?
4. When did you know you wanted to become Catholic?
5. What made you decide to become Catholic?
6. How did you go about telling significant others (romantic partners, friends, family, etc.) in your life about your decision to become Catholic? Please write about these experiences.
7. If you have already been confirmed in the Catholic faith, please write about your experience in completing the RCIA process and being confirmed.
8. How has your understanding of your spiritual identity changed as a result of transitioning to the Catholic faith?
9. Do you foresee any changes in your spiritual identity in the future? Please explain.
10. Please write about any other experiences or thoughts you may have concerning spirituality and spiritual identity.

In addition, please keep a running journal describing any encounters, conversations, or interactions you may have with other people concerning the subject of your spirituality over the course of the month. Include as much detail as possible, both about the interaction itself and how the interaction affected you and/or your relationship with the other person.



**Appendix B: Interview Questions**

1. What do you believe is the relationship between religious and spiritual identity?
2. Can you describe any meaningful spiritual experiences you've been through?
3. How has your transition to the Catholic faith influenced your relationships with significant others?
4. What was your perception of the Catholic faith before you decided to become Catholic?
5. Can you describe any difficulties you've experienced as a result of this decision?
6. Can you describe any benefits you've experienced as a result of this decision?
7. In your everyday interactions with other people, do you think they see your spiritual identity? How do you communicate it?
8. Do you think your spiritual identity has been affected in any way as a result of participating in this study?
9. Is there anything else you'd like to talk about concerning your spiritual identity?

\*During the interviews, the participants may also have been asked to elaborate on their journal entry responses to any of the journal prompts.

**Appendix C: Bulletin Announcement****REQUEST FOR PARTICIPANTS: A Study on Spiritual Identity**

Stephanie Gruner, a graduate student at Eastern Illinois University, is conducting research on spiritual identity for a master's thesis in Communication Studies. She has recently joined the Catholic faith and is seeking participants for this research who have not grown up Catholic, but have transitioned or are transitioning to the Catholic faith in adulthood. If you are interested in participating, you will be asked to share your story/understanding of your spiritual identity. Participation will involve responding to prompts about your spiritual experiences and identity in the form of written or typed journal entries, as well as completing an audio-recorded interview with Stephanie. A pseudonym will be used for all data tied to you, so no other person besides Stephanie and her faculty advisor will be able to tie your journal entries or interview answers to your real name and your confidentiality will be protected throughout the research process. Stephanie hopes you will consider participating in this study as it may help us to better understand spiritual identity and may help you to gain a better understanding of your own spiritual identity as well. If you are interested, you can contact Stephanie by emailing her at [smgruner@eiu.edu](mailto:smgruner@eiu.edu) or calling her at 630-862-1416.

**Appendix D: Letter to Potential Participants**

Dear

Stephanie Gruner, a graduate student at Eastern Illinois University, is conducting research on spiritual identity for a master's thesis in Communication Studies. She has recently joined the Catholic faith and is seeking participants for this research who have not grown up Catholic, but have transitioned or are transitioning to the Catholic faith in adulthood. If you are interested in participating, you will be asked to share your story/understanding of your spiritual identity. Participation will involve responding to prompts about your spiritual experiences and identity in the form of written or typed journal entries, as well as completing an audio-recorded interview with Stephanie. A pseudonym will be used for all data tied to you, so no other person besides Stephanie and her faculty advisor will be able to tie your journal entries or interview answers to your real name and your confidentiality will be protected throughout the research process.

Stephanie hopes you will consider participating in this study as it may help us to better understand spiritual identity and may help you to gain a better understanding of your own spiritual identity as well. If you are interested, you can contact Stephanie by emailing her at [smgruner@eiu.edu](mailto:smgruner@eiu.edu) or calling her at 630-862-1416. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Appendix E: Recruitment Flyer



# Seeking Participants for Research

**Who:** Adults who have  
converted to the Catholic faith

**What:** Complete journals and an interview

**Why:** Share your stories of spiritual  
transformation and contribute to our  
understanding of spiritual identity

Contact:  
Stephanie Gruner  
EIU Graduate Student

630-862-1416; [smgruner@eiu.edu](mailto:smgruner@eiu.edu)